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Flip Fred, the Pack-Peddler Prince.

BY EDWARD LYTTON.



UP POPPED A HEAD AND A PAIR OF SHOULDERS, WHILE A BRIGHT PAIR OF EYES SURVEYED THE PERAMBULATING MERCHANT CURIOUSLY.

Flip Fred,

THE PACK-PEDDLER PRINCE;

OR,

The Witch of the Black Swamp.

BY EDWARD LYTTON.

CHAPTER I.

THE PACK-PEDDLER'S "MASH."

It was August.

The heat was intense—almost intolerable. The grass seemed parched to the very roots, and all other vegetation wilted and drooped 'neath the sun's scorching rays.

Sheep and cattle alike sought such shelter as protected them, and few persons were seen at work during the mid-hours of the day.

Yet, trudging along a dusty road that wound in a picturesque serpentine course through a beautiful Virginian valley, betwixt lofty timbered hills, came a person on whom the summer sun's rays seemed to have no depressing effect.

Some seventeen or eighteen years of age, but of shorter build than most lads of that age, he was attired in a suit of clothing that was dusty and well-worn.

His face was clear-cut and handsome of feature, and wore a genial, half-humorous expression, the eyes being dark and brilliant.

Although short of stature, he evidently was possessed of strength, for on his back he carried a large oilskin-covered pack, that caused him to bend forward as he walked.

A tin box, carried in his right hand, was another adjunct of his outfit. In fact, he was one of those wandering Bohemians known as pack-peddlers, who, in summer-time, ply their trade in the rural districts of nearly every State.

The majority of these peddlers are of the Israelite race, but the person we have noticed was plainly of Anglo-Saxon blood, and in other circumstances would not have been passed without an admiring glance.

It was near mid-day when he reached the bridge spanning the stream, which ran through the valley in a course as serpentine as was the road.

The long "stringer" which sustained the planks of the bridge afforded a comfortable seat, and the youthful peddler took advantage of the opportunity to rest.

A refreshing breeze had sprung up, for a bank of clouds was gathering in the west, and he bared his head and enjoyed the refreshing air, while glancing about him.

Further on down the valley were a number of farm houses, prominent among which was a large mansion standing on a slight bluff that overlooked the other parts of the valley.

It was a stone structure, of antique appearance, with many queer gables, wings and projections, and with its one bold tower, reminding one of some Rhenish castle.

The peddler on the bridge regarded it critically, after lowering his pack to the floor of the bridge.

"That looks like it might be some sort of place where nobility holds out!" he soliloquized, "and I shouldn't wonder if all the farm-houses below belong to the nabob who owns the castle. Don't 'pear to me, somehow or other, that this is a prolific route for peddlers, for I'm buzzed if I've made a sale since morning. The scenery aire purty enough, but I ain't trampin' fer scenery this season. Money knocks a hard winter into a good humor, and money's what I'm reachin' fer, you bet! To lay back on me oars this winter a-comin' aire the full hight of my ambition; but if I do, I'll have to strike fer a more populous valley than this. I heard about the first families o' Virginia, an' I'm durned if they don't all appear to be centered around these parts. They never want anything—thread, pins, lace, handkerchiefs, buttons and the like appear to be a luxury they allus hev a plenty of. Hello!"

The young tramp-merchant had suddenly made a discovery. Two planks were missing out of the floor of the bridge, near the further end, the aperture being sufficiently wide to prevent a horse or wagon passing without an accident.

But this alone did not cause the pack-peddler's exclamation; for up through the aperture popped a head and a pair of shoulders, while a bright pair of eyes surveyed the perambulating merchant curiously.

The head, the shoulders, the eyes—all belonged to a frowsy-haired girl, attired in calico, and who looked as if she might be about sixteen

years of age—a buxom little elf, with a jolly, laughing countenance, a profusion of brown hair, allowed to have its freedom over her shoulders, and a multitude of freckles and sun-tan upon a face that, otherwise, would have been irresistibly charming.

Head covering she had none, and her plain calico dress indicated her "plebeian" condition.

To the boy peddler, however, it was a charming vision, and he half-rose, and tipped his hat.

"Ah! excuse me. I was not aware till just now that there was any person in this immediate vicinity—especially one so charming!" he said, graciously. "Might I inquire your name?"

"Dunno but you might, if you tuk the pains!" with a saucy toss of the head. "Who are you, and what do you want to know my name for?"

"My name is Fred Floyd, but I'm called Flip Fred by them that knows me best."

"You don't say? What ye got in the pack?"

"Oh, a general stock of merchandise, such as laces, calicoes, gingham, combs, brushes, buttons, shoestrings, thread, pins, needles—"

"Hain't got any candy, have ye?"

"Not a bit!"

"Then ye can mosey along, fer we can't trade."

"I'm sorry I didn't buy out a hull confectionery in the last town I passed through!" Fred protested. "So pretty a girl as you—"

"Pooh!" she interrupted; "ye're tryin' to give me taffy. I ain't purty ner charmin', nor nothin' o' the kind. I'm 'counted freckled as a brindle heifer, an' the ugliest girl in Fairfax."

"Nonsense! You're no such a thing. I've got an eye fer beauty like a hawk has fer chickens, an' I think you're pretty enough to eat, in spite of your freckles. Why, if you was togged out in silks and satins you'd knock the spots off'n all the girls fer looks. I'm a connoisseur on beauty, I am, and don't you forget it!"

The girl laughed merrily at his apparent earnestness.

Only a part of her figure was yet visible through the aperture in the bridge, as she was evidently standing upon some beam below.

"You're tryin' to flatter me," she said, "but 'tain't no use. I know I'm humbly, and I'm glad of it, 'cause I wouldn't be purty an' stuck on myself, like Madeline Magerald is, fer nothin'."

"Who is she?"

"Oh, the major's second wife, ye know—lives up yonder," indicating the castellated residence. "When she gits on her fine rig, an' a bushel o' lime on her face, she jest thinks she's old Queen Vict'ry herself, an' you can't tech her wi' a clothes-prop. Oh, ye jest orter see her—she's great!"

"Don't believe from your description that I should like her!" Flip Fred declared, candidly. "I ain't much stuck on big-bugs myself. But you haven't told me your name yet."

"Oh, well, then, it's Freckles, if you want to know so bad!"

"Freckles?"

"Yes. That's what everybody calls me."

"But you have some other name?"

"S'pose I have. It's Sally Shakes. I'm old Tom Shakes's gal, an' ef ye know anything about Fairfax ye must heard o' him, fer he's the baddest old customer anywhere around these parts."

"Why, I am sorry to hear that."

"So am I. But it don't matter much. Dad's beyond redemption, every one says, an' I'm freckled, an' so we're not counted much by the aristock. They turn up their noses at me, but I don't care. There ain't no love lost. I can throw stones like a slugger an' pay 'em up fer insultin' me. Only yisterday I see'd Madeline Magerald comin' along, wi' her phaeton an' skim-milk hosses, an' I ketched on behind, but she cut me a lick over the back wi' the whip, an' I had to git off; then I swore'd I'd git square wi' her, an' I allus dus everything I agree to. The madame druv over ter ther Larks wi' Boyd de Bynville to-day, an' so I fixed her, you bet!"

"How?" Flip Fred asked, growing more and more interested in the frowsy-headed hoyden.

"Why—why—ye won't tell on me?"

"Certainly not!"

"Well, then, I'll tell ye, but I'd offully hate to have it get to the guv'nor, for he'd jest as lief knock me on the head as to look at me. Ye see, The Larks is a place where picnics meet, up in the hills over yonder. The madame drove over there, an' in comin' back she will have to cross this 'ere bridge or drive thr'u the creek, which is too deep to ford anywheres along here. So I took two of the planks out of the floor, an' sent 'em down-stream, an' oh! golly, won't the madame have a time gettin' back to Magerald Manor! Wal, I should guess so!"

And the wicked little sprite laughed so mis-

chievously and heartily that Flip Fred joined in, although he entertained much doubt as to the propriety of her scheme for revenge.

"Oh! the madame will be mad!" the girl went on, volubly, "and the only way to cross the bridge will be for Boyd de Bynville to get out and patch up the hole with fence-boards. And as he's a reg'lar dude, it would break his heart if he had to do anything so common as that!"

"But are you not afraid an accident may occur to some one else's team?" Fred asked.

"Not a bit of it! I'm goin' to keep watch till the madame comes. After that the hired help at the manor will have to repair the bridge."

"Where do you live, Sally?"

"Git out—don't call me, Sally! Don't like that name for nothin'. Freckles is more high-toned."

"Well, then, where do you live, Freckles?"

"Over in the swamp. Dad owns a big swamp, w'ot he got off the major years ago. Oh! it's a dark an' ferbidden place, an' hes a hard name, but lordy! et is the boss place to raise frogs. You jest orter see the big fat ones dad sells after I ketches 'em. He makes a pile of money, but it all goes down his throat."

"So you make your living by ketchin' frogs, eh?"

"Mostly. They're good eatin', they say, tho' I never tried 'em."

"Nor I don't think I should want to try!" Fred declared, with a shrug of disgust. "Turkey and chicken is good enough for me. How old are you, Miss Freckles? Get up out of that hole, and let me see how big you are."

"Oh, get out! I—I've got no shoes on."

"That makes no difference. You needn't be bashful, for we're pretty well acquainted. Give me your hand and I'll lift you."

She did not accept his proffered assistance, however, but climbed nimbly and gracefully up, and stood blushing and rosy before him, a new-born sense of modesty seeming to have taken possession of her, as she stood before his brilliant and admiring gaze.

She was not so tall as he, but possessed a figure both graceful and shapely even in the plain calico dress she wore, the skirt of which reached only to her pretty ankles.

She wore no shoes or stockings, but her feet were white and clean.

In fact, she was a picture so interesting that Flip Fred was quite captivated.

Though young in years, the boy possessed knowledge and experience creditable to a much older person.

He had been a "rolling stone" from his earliest remembrance, now on land, now on water, and had passed through many phases of remarkable experience—all of which had served to educate him beyond his years.

As a rule, he was never very much attracted toward those of his age in the opposite sex, but, somehow, Miss Sally Shakes had caught him, or at least his admiration, and as he stood gazing at her, wondering if she were not a rough diamond that would develop into a priceless jewel, for the working, the sound of carriage-wheels was heard, and Freckles suddenly disappeared down through the aperture in the bridge, as if by magic, at the same time crying:

"The madame's coming! The madame's coming! Don't let on that I'm around here, nor don't you help her to get across the bridge—that is, if you like me!"

And looking up the road over which he had lately traveled, Flip Fred saw approaching a handsome basket-phaeton, drawn by a span of milk-white horses.

The phaeton contained two persons—a lady, attired in white, and a man wearing a white high hat. The latter was driving.

And it was with not a little curiosity that Flip Fred awaited the approach.

CHAPTER II.

A "DUCKED" DUDE.

THE phaeton was a beauty, the horses a valuable and handsome span, and the occupants of the vehicle well-dressed and aristocratic of appearance.

This much Fred Floyd had time to note ere the horses came dashing up the slight ascent to the bridge, and he had to spring forward and grasp them by the bits to prevent their advancing into further danger.

"Slow up there!" he cried. "It is impossible for you to cross that bridge!"

He set the horses back upon their haunches with the force of a young Hercules, and then stepped to one side to get a better look at the occupants of the vehicle.

The driver was a man large and portly. Whether he was constitutionally fat or no was

not easy to determine, for his red face was suggestive of bloat. He was probably forty years of age, dressed elegantly, and in society might have been called handsome, for he had a well-shaven face, a heavy, gracefully-twirled mustache, black as a raven's wing, eyes of a like color, and hair to match. There was nothing ill-bred about him, at the casual glance, and a critic might have set him down as a lady's man.

This, according to Freckles, was Boyd de Bynville.

The madame, for whom the girl had manifested such intense dislike, was but little if any younger than her companion, and yet appearances went to prove that she was far from desiring to lose a youthful appearance.

She wore a magnificent toilet, for the most part made up of rare cream-colored lace; glittering jewels were resplendent parts of her outfit, and she was painted to a perfection that really made her look years younger than she was.

In youth she had no doubt been remarkably beautiful of face, and had not altogether lost that beauty yet. There was a coldness of expression, however, when her face was at repose, and a peculiar glitter of the eyes, that suggested a spirit in the woman not altogether congenial or trusty.

Flip Fred made some such an inventory, at any rate, as he surveyed the twain, and he more-over formed the opinion that Freckles was not far from right in believing that the madame considered herself without a peer.

"Well, sir, what's the matter?" Boyd de Bynville demanded, importantly, after he had surveyed Flip Fred from head to foot, with an unfavorable scowl. "What's the matter of the bridge?"

"If you take the pains to gaze ahead you'll be able to see that two planks are missing from the floor of the bridge. Should you attempt to drive across you would likely injure your wagon and imperil the lives of your horses!" Fred said, a trifle nettled at the surly tone in which he had been addressed.

"Who removed the planks from the bridge?" De Bynville demanded, angrily, eying the lad with suspicion.

"How do you expect me to know, when I just came along a bit ago and made the discovery?" Fred responded. "Perhaps the roadmaster of the neighborhood may have had something to do with it, as the planks are not about the bridge."

"Then how are we to get across?"

"That's a question for you to answer. About the only way I see for you to do is to repair the bridge yourself, or pick up yer cart and horses and tote them over on your back."

Boyd de Bynville gave vent to a snarl of anger; that he would have sworn furiously, had he not been in the presence of Madame Magerald, was evident.

"Confound it, I've half a notion you did this job, boy, expecting to realize money for assisting us out of this dilemma!" he declared, scrutinizing Fred with a scowling expression.

"That's just my opinion!" Madame Magerald joined in. "These wandering tramps are ever up to some game to extort money. Why don't you jump out and chastise the insolent fellow, Boyd?"

"Yes, why don't you?" Fred retorted, throwing out his knotty fists in pugilistic pose, while his brilliant eyes flashed enough defiance to illuminate his face into an expression that was manly and handsome.

"Since you have suspected me of so unjust an act, you can't pitch into me any too soon, sir. I calculate, if I am a peddler, that I do not deserve to be called a tramp, and I am every inch as good and respectable as you are. I had nothing to do with tampering with this bridge, and if it had not been for me, you might have driven your horses into the hole before discovering it!"

"Bah! nonsense! You need not try to exonerate yourself, for it will not work on me. If you didn't tamper with the bridge, all right, so far as that goes, but you're a suspicious-looking character at best, and I shall make it a point to see that you don't linger long in this neighborhood."

"Oh, you will?"

"Yes, I will, and no more sauce from you or I'll shoot you."

"You'd better not try it, for I can dodge a bullet equal to a nine-lived cat. To hear you spout, you must be some blunderbuss about these parts. If that's the case, and you're on your muscle, just step out of yer phaeton, an' come pat me on the cheek. It won't take but a few minutes to tell who is the best feller, and

you can either go home covered with glory or gore, as the case may be. I'm Flip Fred, if you want to know it, and you can bet I'm up to the times!"

"You're an infernal scoundrel, sir, and I wouldn't dirty my hands fighting with you!" De Bynville fired back.

Then, as they glared daggers at cool Fred, the precious pair in the carriage consulted in an undertone.

The consultation evidently was in regard to how to get across the stream, in order to continue on their way to Magerald Manor, which was something over a mile from the bridge, as the highway ran.

The bridge was the only means of getting on the other side, for the stream ran between high banks and was deep and swift.

Therefore the way must be repaired.

With a confident expression upon his face, Flip Fred had reseated himself upon one of the stringers of the bridge, and was awaiting developments.

Below him, in under the flooring, Fred fancied he could hear an occasional girlish giggle, and was fearful that Freckles would betray her presence, and thereby bring trouble upon her own shoulders.

Much rather would he have stood the blame than to see her suffer, to whom he had taken such a sudden and strong fancy.

De Bynville arose in the phaeton, and gazed forward at the aperture, over the horses' heads; and it occurred to Flip Fred, at the instant, that maybe the man was afraid to get out of the vehicle from fear of being assaulted.

"See here!" De Bynville said, at length, addressing Floyd, "that hole is not too large to be easily repaired. Some boards from yonder fence would temporarily fix it, so that we could pass over."

"Without a doubt!" Fred assented dryly.

"Then hurry up and knock off some of the boards, my fellow, and cover the aperture strong enough for us to drive across, and I'll flip you half a dollar. We cannot afford to be detained here in this manner."

"It is rather tough!" Fred allowed, as he took a cigar-case from his pocket and selected and lit a fragrant weed. "Such circumstances will occur, you know, in the best regulated families."

"Nonsense! Do you refuse to do it?"

"Do what?"

"Fix the bridge as I directed."

"What—for fifty cents?"

"Yes, or I'll give you a dollar if you hurry up about it."

Fred arose, drew himself to his fullest height, and gazed calmly at De Bynville and the madame, his thumbs under his arm-pits, his face good-naturedly sarcastic.

"See here, Mr. Frank Fielding, alias Boyd de Bynville," he said, coolly, "do I look to you like a dollar sort of individual? Is there anything about my figger that reminds you of a ninety-nine-cent emporium? Do I look as if I could be persuaded into menial duty for any such Bland argument as you have offered? If you think I do, your mental stratum has undergone a shock from which you may never recover. I'm called Flip Fred, and I'm just so flip that one dollar, nor one hundred, would tempt me to lift a hand to assist you in getting across this bridge."

Boyd de Bynville heard him, and an expression of surprise, rage and chagrin passed over his face.

"Curses seize you!" he hissed. "Your impudence surpasses anything I ever met with. But, mind you, if you don't make tracks out of this township lively, you will find out where you are the loser and I am the master."

With face pale with anger that he was evidently endeavoring to suppress, he leaped from the vehicle, and began a savage attack on the nearest panel of a fence, using a disused fence-post as a battering-ram. In a few minutes' time he had secured enough boards to bridge over the hole, and did it in a manner that enabled him to lead the horses and phaeton safely across.

Then tossing the reins to Madame Magerald, he returned and confronted Flip Fred, his aspect anything but pleasant or reassuring.

"Young man!" he said, "I know not who you are, nor your business here, nor why you addressed me as Frank Fielding—a name not my own; but I do know that, by your insolence to your superiors, and your flipness, as you choose to term it, you have won my enmity, and if you value your life you will hasten your departure from this vicinity. You see yonder manor-house? There are dogs there, which, if not bloodhounds, are by no means partial to tramps, and have a scent as keen as that of a fox. Those dogs will be let loose when I reach

Magerald Manor, mind you. And that they may have no difficulty in distinguishing their victim by scent, they shall smell my hand!"

As he spoke, Boyd de Bynville, by a quick movement raised his hand—a faultlessly-scented gloved hand, and slapped Flip Fred full in the face, nearly knocking him over into the stream.

With a cry the young peddler gained his feet, and, as De Bynville started toward the phaeton, a gripe seized his shoulder, and in a moment he was raised bodily from his feet.

Before he could make any effort at defense, he was swung through the air, and sent spinning over the side of the bridge into the water.

Madame Magerald uttered a piercing scream that startled the horses, and they went dashing furiously away toward Magerald Manor; while, up out of the hole in the bridge, casting aside the boards as she came, appeared Freckles, and as she ran to the side of the bridge and looked over into the stream where De Bynville was struggling, she cried out in an ecstasy of delight:

"Hurra fer Flip Fred! The die is cast, and the dude is ducked!"

CHAPTER III.

FATHER AND SON.

MAGERALD MANOR was owned by Major Maximilian Magerald, who was the last direct surviving member of a family which had dwelt in Virginia for several generations.

The manor itself was a sort of heirloom, handed down to its present owner, and the surrounding territory, inclusive of many farm-houses and attendant outbuildings, was a princely property, that time and expenditure had brought to a state of perfection, most charming to the eye. Every improvement of actual value had been provided for the estate, and it is safe to say that no finer farming property could be found in the State.

The manor was set down in a park of magnificent trees of varied species, and, outside of its own imposing proportions, was surrounded by many adornments in the way of walks, arbors, beds of flowers and spraying fountains, and here and there a figure of statuary.

It was a grand place and to the ordinary eye nothing but unalloyed happiness could be the lot of those to whom belonged the right to enjoy its charms.

Further down the valley by a mile, nestled the little village, or more appropriately, settlement, known as Fairfax to our readers—with a population of several hundred, and a few business enterprises, that were for the most part controlled by or under the immediate patronage and supervision of Major Magerald.

But it is within the stately old manor-house we would conduct the reader, at about the same hour which witnessed the incidents at the bridge.

In a grandly-furnished parlor, resplendent with mirrors, magnificent pictures and all that was luxurious to the eye, the major sat at an open window, gazing out upon the flowering lawn, and listening to the words of another and a younger man than he, who was seated near at hand.

The major was a man of nearly sixty, handsome of figure and stately of appearance. Although his hair and beard were snowy white, his face was round, fresh, and only a trifle marked with care-lines. His whole demeanor was that of a man who was in the habit of taking matters at their pleasantest aspect, and who would not worry at ordinary trouble.

The man who addressed him, it needed no second glance to tell, was of his own kin—his son.

He was a decided blonde, handsome to a fault and yet lacking in the nobility of appearance that characterized his father.

His face, his eyes in particular, showed that he was a fast liver, and dissipated—that, even while he was conversing with his father, he was to some extent under the influence of liquor.

If the major was aware of this, his face did not betray it. In fact, his was a face naturally so passive that it betrayed nothing, even of anger.

There were those who knew, however, that the major was the wrong sort of man to trifle with, and Dick Magerald, as wild a scapegrace as ever brought dishonor to a proud Virginian home, was not ignorant of the fact; hence his demeanor was most deferential.

"Of course, father, I am aware that there is a wide difference in our stations; but what may that matter? As long as the girl is all-in-all to me, and would make me a true and loving partner in life, why should you not approve of the match? True, I've sown a few wild oats in the past few years, but I have reaped the harvest as well—a harvest of better sense, I trust. Can

you name any objection to the young lady, except that she is not supposed to have the best blue blood running in her veins?"

"There are plenty of objections," the major said, in a tone that indicated his indifference to his son's appeal. "In the first place, the girl is mere child yet—wild, uneducated, innocent enough, I dare say, of any intentional wrong, but giddy and entirely unfitted to become a wife."

"If I recollect right, you esteemed my mother one of the best of women?" Dick said, wincing a bit.

"I certainly did!" was the unhesitating answer.

"Well, as near as I can learn, you and mother were married when she was exactly sixteen?"

"We were."

"And she made a good wife, and gave you the two dutiful children who now grace your home—Mildred and I. You were always happy—at least until the second wife came—"

"Stop! I will not hear a word against her."

"Very well. We will drop her out!" and a faint smile played over Richard Magerald's features.

"Sally is now sixteen, and though wild and wayward, she would in time outgrow all that, and make not only a good wife, but a brilliant woman."

"That is a matter of exceeding doubt. Her father—"

"Her alleged father, you should say!" Dick interposed, warmly; "for there is not a person in Fairfax who believes that a drop of old Tom Shakes's blood flows in her veins!"

The major remained silent for a moment, his gaze still averted to the flower-beds out upon the lawn.

"Well, her alleged father, then," he went on directly, "is a man of dark and stained character, and if reports don't lie, it will not be long ere a move will be made to bring him to the justice he so richly deserves. The girl—for whom I have no particular personal dislike—would suffer by whatever befell him, and all with whom she might be allied or connected would suffer accordingly. Therefore, my son, it but remains for me to say that I object, emphatically to the idea of your union with the untutored child, and there is no use of your again approaching me on the subject."

Dick Magerald arose with a slight bow and put on his hat and gloves.

"That is, I suppose, equivalent to saying that should I marry contrary to your choice, I would receive nothing from you?" he inquired, still preserving his calmness.

"Even more than that!" the major answered, with a slight inclination of his head. "You have put me to a great deal of expense—to keep the name as much as possible out of disgrace during the last year—and I have resolved no longer to do as I have done."

"If you will sport you must wholly rely on your own resources. Of course, I will not refuse you a shelter, but, beyond that, for spending-money you must provide yourself. As for a wife—that's out of the question, even if you reform your habits, so far as Tom Shakes's girl is concerned. So that settles that matter."

"Definitely?"

There was something sarcastic in Richard's tone, and the major glanced at him searchingly.

"Yes; definitely settles it," was the reply, a trifle sternly. "You ought to know that I am not in the habit of speaking inconsiderately or falsely."

"The Mageralds, for generations, have been noted for their veracity," Dick assented; "and now I ask you to witness a truth. I have decided to wed Sally Shakes. Mayhap I will have to do it without your sanction, but I shall do it, just the same. The girl is my destiny, and I am bound to have her."

"Very well. You marry her at the pain of disinheritance—and arrest!"

The major now spoke sternly.

"Arrest?" Dick echoed—"arrest?"

"Exactly!"

"For what? I say, for what?"

"Try to marry the girl, and find out!" the major replied. "Go, now; our interview is terminated. Defy me if you like. The manor is your home until you do. Then—the jail!"

And with a bow, Richard Magerald turned and left the room.

CHAPTER IV.

CEMENTED FRIENDSHIP.

FORTUNATELY for Boyd de Bynville, he could swim or he might have been drowned in the

deep, swiftly-flowing stream into which the indignant young pack-peddler had pitched him.

As it was, he swam and walked to the shore, and shook himself as some great shaggy dog might have done, and gazed after the now flying phaeton, which was disappearing down the valley, leaving behind it a cloud of dust.

Upon the bridge Freckles was dancing while laughter pealed from her rosy lips.

Flip Fred stood near her, looking both amused and vexed.

Seeing that there was no course for him to reach Magerald Manor, except by "footing it," Boyd de Bynville turned his dripping face toward the two upon the bridge and shook his fist savagely. Not a word he uttered, but the look upon his dark face was one of unutterable hatred.

Then he turned and strode fiercely away down the road, a crestfallen dandy.

Flip Fred gazed after him rather inquiringly.

Freckles did the same.

Her laughter subsided, and she slipped her plump little arm into his.

"Do you know him, Mr. Floyd?"

Fred gazed down at her with a slight start, and then smiled as he saw her looking up into his face.

He felt several years older and more manly then, in the conscious pride that she, at least, did not appear to distrust him, as all the world at large appeared to do.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you seemed to know him—you called him Frank Fielding?"

"Did I—ah! I remember now. No, I don't think he is the man I at first supposed him to be."

"But you do, though! He reminds you of some one you are in search of. Am I not right?"

"Well, yes, possibly. You said his name is De Bynville?"

"Yes—Boyd De Bynville. He cum around these parts, soon after Major Magerald brought home his second wife from New Orleans."

"Ah!"

"Yes. He an' the madame is thick as pie, too. The tenants say the major don't like it, but can't help himself. Dunno how that is. Anyhow, she an' Byndy goes ridin' an' gallopin' together, an' they say he's tuck up his home at the manor, altogether."

"Where did he stop before?"

"At The Arms—that's the hotel in Fairfax."

"How far is Fairfax from here?"

"Over two miles. But you hadn't better go there."

"Why not?"

"Because De Bynville has lots of money, spends it freely where it will secure him the most friends, an' my dad sez that he's got more friends now than the major has. Dad and the major don't love each other much, you know."

"But what has all this to do with my going to Fairfax, may I ask?"

"A good deal more than you s'pose. Boyd de Bynville is a bad man, and he means to have revenge on you before you get out of this neighborhood. I see'd that in his very looks."

"Indeed! But I fear him not. Nor do I calculate to hurry out of this neighborhood, immediately."

"Oh! don't you?"

"No—decidedly!"

"Golly, I'm glad of that. But, don't go to Fairfax, for you'll be in danger. The gang hangs out there, an' De Bynville won't hesitate to set 'em on you."

"The gang?"

"Yes, the swamp squatters. They're bad, and there's lots of evil laid to them. They don't stop at any crime there's money in, and my old dad's chief-cook-and-bottle-washer uv 'em."

"Indeed!"

"You bet! He's an old Tartar, an' I'll bet there'll be sum big sputterin' an' kickin' when he comes to sizzle, in the hereafter."

"But, is there no law and order in Fairfax?"

"Lots of it. But, you see, the gang don't do their work openly. They does it so sly that no one knows of it until after it is done—then, nothin' can be proved ag'in 'em. 'Twasn't long ago that a commercial agent was found strangled in his bed, at The Arms, but there couldn't nothin' be proved who did it!"

Flip Fred uttered a whistle of surprise.

"This don't seem to be a Christian locality!" he said.

"Not a bit. There's queer things hev happened in this town within the past few years, an' I heard old Mom Hayden say that, ef a detective could live long enough in this valley he'd find out enuff s'prisin' things to write a book about."

"What is to hinder a detective living here?"

"Humph! Every detective as ever cum, mysteriously disappeared, and wasn't never heard of afterward. The gang sizes up all strangers as come 'round these parts. So if you want to remain heer, without danger to yourself, there's only one thing for you to do."

"What's that?"

"Kiss that young girl at thy side—"

It is a talisman of luck with you to abide;

Refuse to do as I have bid,

An' 'twere better you were beneath the mountain hid

In a shrill, discordant tone the words were uttered, and looking quickly toward a small willow copse at one end of the bridge, Flip Fred beheld an old hag, tall, gaunt and wrinkled—a hideous, witch-like old creature, with straggling gray hair, tattered garments, and gnarled staff, while perched upon her shoulder was a various-hued parrot.

"Great Caesar! what's this I've struck?" the young peddler gasped, for the hag's long, bony forefinger was pointed commandingly at him. "Have I wandered into elf-land at last?"

"That is Old Mom—the Witch of the Swamp—the widow Hayden!" Freckles explained, in low, rapid words. "What she commands is best to obey, for she has performed many miracles. To obey her means to win the protection of her power, and save you from the gang. To refuse her—"

"Awake! young man—do as I bid!"

And save the nailing of a coffin's lid!"

came from the hag's lips in tones of severity.

"All right, old gal! I'm with you!" Fred declared, encircling Freckles's waist with his strong right arm. "When it comes to kissing the girls I am right at home in the front parlor."

And bending forward, he imprinted a burning kiss upon Freckles's rosy lips.

"'Tis well!" the hag said, immediately; "two fates by me united, two troths to soon be plight-ed; 'tis well. Behold, young man, in her your lucky talisman!"

And then, with a wave of her hand, she turned and hobbled away down the dusty road, making a queer and suggestive picture.

"Well! I'll be gummed, perforated and cut up into porous-plasters if she don't take the biscuit!" Flip Fred declared, with a long breath of surprise. "Say, Freckles, she's off her base, ain't she?"

Freckles laughed merrily.

"If you mean crazy, I dunno," she replied, displacing his arm from about her waist, with maidenly modesty. "Some say she is, and some believe t'other way. She's smart and shrewd, anyhow, and is connected with the Evil One. Everybody believes that."

"Pooh! Don't you believe any such nonsense as that?"

"But I do, and so does everybody. She works miracles—she is possessed of witchcraft. She can give a person good luck or bad luck. Even the poker-players at The Arms allows that. Them that stands in solid with her never loses. And, more than all, she's got influence over the gang, an' can check 'em whenever she wants to. Four times she's saved me from assault, an' once from bein' killed, when the gang thought I'd peached on 'em. So you kin bet she's solid on your side, now, an' no harm won't come to you on any account."

"If so, all right; but I don't take the least stock in witches, and the like!" Fred said. "However, that privileged kiss fully repaid me for the trouble of obeying the old crone's order, and I could safely wish that she might return, and give me another order, of the same sort!"

"Oh, indeed—do you? Well, the Witch won't come back—that settles that!"

"And also, that I am to be deprived of another kiss?"

"You bet! I've got another feller that monopolizes the most of my kisses. I don't care so very much fer him, 'cept he makes me presents, and allus has his pockets full of candy, and is high-toned."

"Some day I s'pect he'll own the manor—he's the major's son—an' then I might like him better than I do, providin' I hadn't some other beau that I liked better than him!"

And she gave him a coy glance.

"Ah! so you have a lover, eh? Well, for my part, I don't wonder, for I think you're the very girl who would turn any young fellow's susceptible heart. I have taken a strong liking to you, anyhow."

"Pshaw! you don't mean it."

"But I do, though."

"And you think I am—you would like to be my—that is—"

"Yes, Sally, I would like to be your beau, if my attentions would be agreeable to you. I have not come to the vicinity of Fairfax to go away immediately, if at all, and since we have been so singularly thrown into each other's company, I should dislike very much to lose your acquaintance. So shall we be friends?"

And he put out his hand warmly.

She put her smaller one in his grasp, and dropped her gaze, a pretty flush suffusing her cheeks.

"I have no objections to continuing our acquaintance," she murmured, "but I am afraid dad and Mister Dick won't like it. They count on making me mistress o' the manor one o' these days, when I grow up."

"Do they? Well, you know the old saying, 'there's many a slip twixt the cup and lip,' and so we will not let their disapproval mar our acquaintance."

"I hope not. You have an object in coming to this vicinity, sir?—more than jest as a peddler?"

"Perhaps, my little friend, but mention that to no one. Ostensibly, my sole occupation is that of a traveling pack-peddler, and as such I wish to be known for the present. And now, as it is getting along toward night, I will be trudging along on my way. Where do you live, and where shall I meet you again?"

"You are not going to Fairfax?"

"Yes—straight to that burg."

"But remember the danger I told ye about!"

"I've not forgotten, but fear not. I'm armed and always pretty wide awake, so there's little danger but what I shall get along all right."

"Oh! I hope so, sir, an' mebbe Old Mom's interest in you will keep away the danger. But look out for Boyd de Bynville. He's a bad egg."

"I shall not forget him."

"Don't. And now, I live 'way over yonder, 'cross lots, near the edge of the timber, which is the beginnin' of Black Swamp. A wagon-road runs from Magerald Manor to the edge of the swamp, an' not far from where dad's cabin is. But I'd not advise you to come near the swamp. It ain't a pleasant place for a stranger, and is dangerous in more ways than one."

"But where will I see you then?"

"Oh! you're liable to see me 'most any place, or any time. I'm here, there and everywhere, like a bat. I come to the village every morning bright and early."

"Very well. Then I'll be up and watching for you. So au revoir."

He drew her to him and kissed her several times; then they separated, he shouldering his pack and trudging away down the dusty road, and she starting off across lots toward Black Swamp, pausing now and then to gaze back at him, a demure look in her pretty eyes.

"He's nice, and I like him," she said; "better than even Dick Magerald. I wonder how Dick will take it when he hears I've got a new suitor. Oh! won't he be mad, though?"

CHAPTER V. MILDRED.

FLIP FRED continued on his way toward Fairfax, busied in thought, and his face wearing rather a studious expression.

"I'm here at last, on the scene of my investigation," he muttered, "and a strange combination of circumstances have thrown two persons in my path, whom I had rather not have yet met—De Bynville, as he calls himself, and the Witch. Did the old creature know of my coming, or was her presence at the bridge just a chance happening? One thing is favorable—she evidently likes my little mash, freckles, and it may induce her to take an interest in me. But, De Bynville—what is he doing here? Up to no good, I'll bet, and may seek to make me trouble. Before he does, I must fix my leverage accordingly."

En route for the village he stopped at the several Magerald farm-houses, occupied by the hired help of the estate, and succeeded in making several sales of what are known among the peddling fraternity as "Yankee notions."

He was leaving one of these houses when a little boy ran out and intercepted him.

"Please, sir, wait a minute!" he said. "Mildred Magerald wants to see you."

Not without considerable curiosity to know what the rich old major's daughter could want of him, he waited near the front yard gate.

In a few minutes a young lady came out of the farm-house and approached him, carrying a letter in her hand.

The two regarded each other with interest.

She was a slender, fairy-like maiden, of somewhere near Fred's own age, with a pretty face and sunny hair, and eyes of liquid blue. She

was attired in a charming costume of white, and reminded Fred of a glorious morning sunbeam.

"Excuse me for detaining you, sir," she said, pleasantly, as she approached, "but I wished to ask a favor of you, and will pay you for your trouble."

"I am a thousand times at your service, miss, and require no pay!" Fred said, gallantly lifting his hat. "You have a letter you would have posted at the village, I infer?"

His polite address evidently surprised her, for she gave him a second glance, as if wondering if he was not some prince in disguise.

"Thank you! It is not really to have the letter posted," she said in a lower tone, "but to be delivered to the party for whom it is intended. You are going on to Fairfax, I presume?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then, could I get you to inquire for Mr. Hoyt Hayden, and give him this note? He is usually at the village about sunset, and being well known by everybody there, I presume you would have no difficulty in finding him."

"It will give me great pleasure to execute your errand, miss!" Fred said, bowing low, and receiving the dainty missive. "In case I should be unsuccessful in finding Mr. Hayden—"

"Burn the letter. I would not have it fall into other hands for the world!"

"Very well. I will do my utmost to find Mr. Hayden, and deliver your letter to him. In case of not finding him, I will burn it."

"Thank you very much, sir, as it will be a great accommodation, and here is something for your trouble."

And she extended toward him a five-dollar gold-piece.

"You will excuse me, miss," Fred said, stepping back a pace. "I could not think of accepting anything for so slight a service, Miss Magerald."

"But it is a great accommodation, and I must insist on your taking this trifle."

"And I must respectfully decline. I could never forgive myself for doing that."

"Well, if you will not accept it, will you call around at the manor to-morrow, and allow me to patronize you, for you really must let me repay my indebtedness to you in some way?"

"If there is anything in my humble stock-in-trade that you desire, miss, I shall be only too glad to wait upon you."

"Then call at nine to-morrow, and I will try to get square with you," she said, shaking her finger at him with a pleasant laugh as she turned away.

And so Fred continued on his way to Fairfax.

"If this neighborhood turns out many more such visions of beauty as Miss Magerald, I'm hanged if a feller wouldn't nigh go distracted," he muttered.

"I see through Mildred's case as clear as a whistle. Mildred has got a lover whom the old gent don't approve, and she's carrying on a sly correspondence with him. His name is Hayden. Ah! can he be a son of the Witch Hayden? If so, it easily accounts for the supposed prejudice of the major against him."

It was nearly sunset by the time Flip Fred reached Fairfax, and put up at The Arms, the only hotel at the place, and by large odds the most pretentious structure, it being a large, four-story building of granite, and supplied with modern improvements.

In winter-time it enjoyed a large transient custom from people seeking a warmer climate, but in summer it barely made running expenses, and Flip Fred had no difficulty in obtaining a desirable room at a moderate price.

Before attempting to hunt up Mr. Hoyt Hayden, he sought a local clothing, hat and shoe store, and when, after supper, he emerged upon the street, he presented a far different appearance than when he had entered the town. By a liberal expenditure he had obtained a fine suit, hat, shoes and other furnishings, and no one would have thought that he had plodded on foot through the country, with a pack on his back.

After supper he instituted a few inquiries for Hayden, but was informed that he had not yet made his appearance on the street that evening, so Fred seated himself on the veranda of the hotel, and proceeded to enjoy a cigar, while he thought over the incidents of that day.

He was thus engaged, when a dog-cart with a magnificent pair of coal-black horses attached to it, dashed up to the door, driven by Major Magerald of the manor.

As he drew rein, the major scanned the faces of those guests who were seated on the veranda, but, after a moment, not appearing to find the

person he was looking for, although he eyed Flip Fred, inquiringly, he tossed the reins to the hostler and stepped out of the cart, immediately entering the hotel.

"I wonder can he be looking for me?" Fred mused, remembering his promise and Mildred's letter in his pocket. "That looks as if it might be Major Magerald."

What if the major had learned of Fred's possession of Mildred's letter, and was hot on the chase, hoping to get possession of

Should he give it up?

Fred argued not.

He had made a compact, as it were, and Hoyt Hayden should have the letter, or it should be consigned to the flames.

Fred was thus thinking when the major came out of the hotel and walked up the street.

Fred drew a breath of relief.

"He was not hunting for me, after all," he mused, and went on smoking his cigar.

Directly some one seated near, and who had heard him ask for Hoyt Hayden, touched him on the arm.

"You wished to see young Hayden, did you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's the man across the street in the post-office doorway."

"Thank you," Fred said, and arose and crossed the street.

A few steps brought him into the presence of Hoyt Hayden.

He was a man of some twenty-four years, athletic of build, and evidently a person of strength, celerity of movement and muscular prowess.

His face was just an every-day mustached one, with nothing startlingly or impressively handsome about it—a face that would pass in a crowd as ordinarily good-looking, with its firm, rather pleasant mouth and beaming brown eyes, that were not wont to flinch in their gaze.

He had been looking at Flip Fred keenly, as the latter crossed the street.

"Excuse me!" Fred said, coming to the point at once; "are you Hoyt Hayden?"

"I am, sir," was the prompt response.

"Then here is a note that I was commissioned to deliver to you," and the young pack-peddler extended the missive with a bow.

Hayden received it, gave it a glance, and the bowed in return, and smiled.

"Thank you," he said, pleasantly. "I recognize the hand, and am under many obligations to you, sir!"

"Not at all!" assured Fred, and returned to the veranda of The Arms, and resumed his former seat.

Hoyt Hayden stood in the doorway of the post-office, read the missive, and then crossed over to The Arms.

"Are you the peddler who was at the bridge above here to-day?" he inquired, in an undertone.

"I am," Fred replied.

"Then I, too, have something to deliver to you. Here is a talisman, in the shape of a diamond-set star. Take it and pin it to your vest, and it will guard you through labyrinths that would otherwise lead to your destruction. This will give you luck. No matter what befalls you, never give up the star, willingly, even though you be offered the fortune of the Mageralds for it!"

He slipped a small package into Flip Fred's hands, and then vanished within the hotel.

For a moment the boy sat silent, breathless, yet visibly excited.

"I have not done wrong in coming!" he breathed at last. "I have friends, even among mine enemies."

He arose directly, went to his room, and by the gaslight examined the trinket, to which Hoyt Hayden's words seemed to attach so much importance.

It was a gold star of considerable weight, with a pin attached to the under side. The top was engraved in grotesque figures and characters, representing devils, angels, animals, and wound up with a sidewise lion's head, the single eye of which was a brilliant diamond imbedded in the gold.

After examining it for several minutes, Fred pinned it to his vest, and went down-stairs.

"If there is anything in Hayden's words," he mused, "I am henceforth on the road to success. And if my mission ends as I have so fervently prayed it would, there is much in store for me."

The twilight deepened on the piazza of the Fairfax Arms, but the Magerald dog-cart still remained in charge of the hostler.

But at length two men came down the street.

One was the major, portly and official of aspect—the other an undersized individual, red-whiskered and in his shirt-sleeves.

The two halted in front of the piazza, and the major once more looked over the guests who were seated there.

"That's the fellow!" he said, finally, pointing out Flip Fred.

Fred quickly arose, as the man in the shirt-sleeves stepped forward.

"What's wanted?" he demanded, quietly.

"You are!" the man responded. "Your name is Frederick Floyd, is it not?"

"It is."

"Well, I am a constable, and I have a warrant for your arrest."

"Indeed! What is the charge against me?"

"You are charged with two serious offenses—one, of tampering with a local highway bridge, for the purpose of extorting money—the second, of causing the runaway of Major Magerald's horses, and, as a result, the probable death of the major's wife. Sirrah! you are my prisoner!"

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE STRONG ROOM.

FLIP FRED had listened to the charge without betraying any considerable feeling of alarm or interest.

"Hold up!" he cried, as the constable advanced. "You need scarcely take the trouble to lay hands on me, for if I am ordered under arrest, that's all-sufficient. The charges against me, however, are not just—as it was Madame Magerald's own scream that frightened the horses and caused them to run away, and as for the bridge, I had nothing to do with removing the planks."

"That you will be given an opportunity to prove to-morrow!" the constable said, grimly, as if he had no doubt of the young peddler's guilt. "You'll have to submit to be locked up to-night."

"Very well. I've no objections, for I am satisfied that I will be cleared in the morning."

"You're the more satisfied of the two of us, I presume!" was the reply. "As we have no jail, shall have to handcuff you, and lock you up, under guard, in the hotel."

"I have no objections to being locked up, under guard; but handcuffs are something I never wore, and never will!" Fred cried, sharply.

"What, sir—dare you defy the majesty of the law?"

"In that much. I emphatically object to being manacled like a common thief. Lock me up in a dungeon if you like, but do not attempt to put them things on me!" and Fred pointed to the "bracelets" that the constable had taken from his pocket—"or you will regret it as long as you live."

His tone was stern and ringing, and he drew his figure up to its fullest height as he confronted the constable.

There was a subdued murmur of approval among the guests of The Arms, who were seated on the veranda.

Major Magerald also regarded the young man with an expression akin to admiration drifting across his inscrutable countenance.

"I think we can fix it all right, Jones," he said, touching the constable. "We will take the young man to the manor, and lock him up for the night in the strong room, thus saving the necessity of handcuffing him."

"Very well, major. It's your case, so do as you like," Jones replied. "Come, sir, get into the dog-cart."

"I prefer to walk, as the distance is not great," Fred announced, quietly.

"Well, if you walk, I walk!" Jones declared, evidently in no wise inclined to allow his man to escape, and thereby miss a constable-fee. "So, major, you can drive on ahead, and we'll be there shortly after you."

The major bowed, and stepping into his cart, drove away.

Jones and Flip Fred followed, neither speaking on the way.

At last they reached Magerald Park, and advancing up one of the serpentine walks, stepped into the broad, imposing entrance to the manor.

A liveried colored servant met them at the door, and led the way.

They were conducted up three flights of softly carpeted stairs, and through a series of lofty, silent halls, until they reached what was apparently a rear wing of the main structure.

Here, at the abrupt ending of a hall, they paused, and the negro took a huge key from his pocket, inserted it in the lock of a massive iron-bound oaken door, and gave it a turn.

There was a noise of clicking locks, bolts and chains, and the door swung inward.

"Step in!" the darky said. "and wait until I fetch a light."

Jones and Fred obeyed; then they heard the door go quickly shut, with a bang.

"What the deuce does that mean?" Jones growled.

"I guess it means that we are locked in, together!" Fred replied, smiling.

"Confound the nigger! Strike a light, quick, or I shall smother in this darkness!"

"Bah! Wait your time!" was Fred's consoling response. "The coon will soon return, it is likely."

But the coon did not return.

His distant voice was heard, a few minutes later, coming, as was afterward ascertained by Fred, through a speaking-tube, which connected with their prison.

"There's a candle in the room!" the voice announced, and then was heard no more.

Jones shouted several times, at the top of his voice, demanding to be released, but no attention was paid, and he was plainly booked to remain in Flip Fred's society.

"Confound the nigger, he left me in this fix on purpose!" the official fumed. "I fined him once for stealing, and this is his revenge. For heaven's sake, strike a light, young man!"

"I doubt if I have a match!" Fred placidly replied. "In case I haven't, the end of your nose might answer the same purpose."

Jones uttered a growl of disgust, but deigned no reply, at which the young pack-peddler laughed, dryly.

He struck a match, found and lit the candle, and then, as it burned up brightly, they took a keen survey of their quarters.

It was indeed a strong room they had been shut up in. The walls, floor and ceiling were of solid stone masonry, and there was but one window, which was small, round, grated, and near the ceiling.

Huge iron safes lined one side of the room.

The only other furniture was a common stool, on which sat the candlestick.

"Humph! looks like a bank!" Fred commented, turning to the constable.

"So it is—a private one. In them safes is kept the Magerald money, all except what is in landed property and mortgages. That's a big heap of money in there; no one dares to guess how much, but millions of it, it is possible."

"You don't say! The Mageralds don't speculate much?"

"Not any more, since the major has got possession. The estate is a big 'un, yielding a big income. Then, there's a gold mine or two, a coal mine, railroad stock, and so forth. The annual income would make either you or I rich for life."

"Shouldn't think so much money would be safe here!"

"It wouldn't, only this old pile is full of traps and there's no getting near this room, when the traps are set. You saw the old nigger who ushered us in here?"

"I saw him, but I didn't take him to be very old."

"Neither do many. He does not show his age, although he's very old, and as spry and chipper as any of 'em. He's been in the Magerald family for generations. This old manor has many grim and traditional secrets, and the Gnome, as he is by every one called, knows all the secrets but never gives one away."

Fred sat down on the floor, giving the constable the stool, which he gladly occupied, first placing the candlestick on the floor.

"The Gnome must be the major's most trusted friend?" Fred suggested.

"He is, and the only one. No one ever enters except the major and the negro."

"What is to be done with me?"

Jones was silent a moment.

"I don't know," he answered. "The fact that I am under the patronage of the Mageralds prevents me often from speaking. I make no hesitation, however, in saying that I believe De Bynville has poisoned the major's mind against you for throwing him in the creek!"

Fred drew a hard breath.

"He is a scoundrel!" he said.

"No one doubts that!" Jones smiled—"not even the major himself, who has no particular love for the man. The fellow, however, is a great favorite with the madame, her 'childhood chum' I believe she calls him, and since her coming to the manor, he has been constantly near her. Matters have progressed so far, at this stage, that De Bynville has taken up his residence at the manor, and has aspirations for the hand of Miss Mildred."

Jones looked inquiringly at the young peddler as he finished, but Fred was enjoying an apparently sleepy yawn, and a trace of disappointment seemed to flit over the constable's features not unnoticed by the boy, who, however, rested his head upon his hand, with another yawn, and appeared inclined to make the best of matters by going to sleep.

"Where did you come from?" Jones asked, after a moment.

"Oh, everywhere in general but nowhere in particular!" was the reply. "We peddlers blow around with the wind, you know."

"Well, it strikes me you've blown into a storm current, to-day!" Jones remarked. "The major ain't many on words, but he's a will as strong as a Hercules, and, tell the truth, it looks pretty fair for you spendin' a couple months in limbo!"

"Better so, maybe!" Fred drowsily replied, and as he spoke a discordant laugh broke upon their hearing, and both prisoners started to their feet.

"In Heaven's name, what was it?" Jones gasped, his face as white as death. "Did you hear it?"

"I heard it!" Fred replied. "I know its meaning. You have heard of the Witch of the Black Swamp?"

"Of course I have."

"And of her magic star?"

"Yes! Everybody knows of it!"

"Then behold! I wear the charm now, and my liberty is at hand!" Fred cried, tragically, yet without the least idea of there being any truth in the assertion, at the same time exposing the star to the constable's gaze. "Behold! the magic talisman!"

Jones gave it one glance; then dropping on the stool again buried his face in his hands, as if to shut out the sight.

Mechanically Fred turned his gaze toward the safes.

He saw one of the ponderous doors swing open—saw a dark space beyond!

"Come!" the unmistakable voice of the Witch Hayden commanded, and the lad at once stepped forward and into the open way.

The door closed noiselessly after him.

And when Jones, the constable, raised his face from his hands he saw, with a shudder, that he was the only occupant of the Magerald strong-room and its mint of money!

CHAPTER VII.

A BROTHER'S REDRESS.

AT the Magerald Manor, with its retinue of servants and hangers-on, and at Fairfax, it was generally reported that the madame, the major's five-months' bride, was seriously injured by the runaway accident that had spilled her out of the phaeton nearly in front of the Magerald gates.

In her sumptuous chamber, however, the lady lay upon her snowy bed, looking scarcely like a person undergoing any particular pain, or very near to the dark portal.

The magnificent wrapper that shrouded her sylphlike figure, would have done credit to a princess, and her hair was arranged so becomingly as to dispel any unnatural pallor that might have held a place upon her features.

Boyd de Bynville sat close to her bedside, in conversation, and her lily hand was in his.

He was scrupulously attired, no trace of his recent adventure visible; his raven hair was carefully combed, his mustache waxed out to perfection itself.

The major was not present; he seldom was when De Bynville was about.

Not a word, as was known, had passed that De Bynville was not welcome at the manor, but the major did not like the man, and the man knew it, without asking.

If Major Magerald had any grievances, he was not the person to make any exhibition of them.

There were plenty of people within his "province"—it might be called that—who, in their private life fully agreed that the major had made a bad match.

Madame Magerald, as she made no hesitation in announcing herself, in French phrase, was by far a different woman from the plain, beautiful, unassuming Mrs. Magerald before her.

It was an open letter that the major was not suited with his new wife—but the people of Fairfax were to be credited with the authorship of this letter rather than the major.

Rumor hinted that he could undergo a mountain of trouble in utter silence, and rumor was not far from correct.

De Bynville was speaking as he held the madame's hand.

"I don't know why the fellow should have

called my name, Madeline, unless he knew me. But I cannot recall him; if we have ever met before I don't know when or where."

"I, too, have been thinking," madame said, speaking leisurely. "I have been credited with sharp eyes, in my younger days, and I think I am capable of seeing yet. Did you notice any resemblance to any one in that peddler—that peculiar calmness of the face, even while smiling?"

De Bynville reflected, his gaze riveted upon the soft velvet carpet.

"Now that you mention it, I do," he answered, slowly. "But you do not think—"

"Time for that," she interrupted. "Too much thought cannot be profitably concentrated into a small space. The young fellow may be a detective, or something equally as detrimental. And he's no fool!"

"Without a doubt!" the man agreed. "He may be a detective—there's no telling how these accursed hell-hounds will go masquerading. If he should be a spy or detective—though I think he's rather young for that sort of business—there may be trouble ahead for us."

"Exactly. But talk lower. These walls have been said to possess fully-developed ears, and were we overheard, we might encounter trouble."

"Little danger. When I leave your side, fair Madeline, I shall go to attend to it that the pack-peddler does not interfere with our plans. Be he a detective or not, he is equally in our way. You know me. I never leave things to be done by halves, do I?"

"You never have yet. But be careful."

"Always that!" he assured, with a crafty smile.

"By the way," madame spoke up, "how far is the Mildred movement progressing? Do you expect to realize anything from it? Nothing more than U. S. collateral, I hope."

"Of course not. What could I desire of a silly, childish girl like her, Madeline—except her money? You are the jewel of my life—always beautiful, bright and resplendent. Away with others! When we are rich, you are mine!"

Madeline, evidently, was not past the years of susceptibility, for she smiled languishingly at him, and directly said:

"About the other matter—do you not think that by far the strangest?"

"Not yet," De Bynville returned, in a way that bespoke conviction. "I have studied and sounded like a scientist, but so far without result. The negro I dare not approach, or insult with a bribe. He is wrapped up in the major."

"Perhaps. I understand he gets a very magnificent salary. But would not a larger offer reach him?"

"No! I tell you I would not dare tackle him. He serves his master, and no one else, and an attempt to bribe him would but result in the exposure of my purposes, and mayhap yours. That would be disastrous, you know!"

"Then our only hope, so far as the present is concerned, lies in Mildred?"

"Have you out and out asked the major to set aside an appropriately sufficient sum of money?"

"Thrice, already. The first appeal I think impressed him favorably; at the second—after you came—he said he was busy, and would take time to consider; at the third request, made with all the affection I could summon to my command, he listened in silence and without reply—supercilious silence, born of unspoken disregard for my wishes. Oh, Boyd, I detest that man!"

Boyd smiled serenely.

"Control that fiery sweet temper of yours, for the present, or you will spoil all. Much depends upon how we control our actions in the future."

"And much depends upon how you conduct your wooing of Mildred Magerald, sir!" was the pointed reply. "Be but faithful to me and you know what my enmity means."

"I'd rather have your friendship than your enmity, Madeline," he responded, with a bland, reassuring smile. "And now, as this is poker night at The Arms, I will bid you adieu, and go work for our mutual finances. I expect, also, to make some arrangements in regard to the new-comer."

He stooped, kissed her hand, and glided from the room.

In the hall outside he donned his hat and gloves, and descended the stairs.

Outside the entrance door to the manor he came face to face with Richard Magerald, who stepped promptly in the dark man's path.

"Ah! Dick, is that you?" De Bynville demanded affably, considering that the two had scarce exchanged a word since the madame's

school-day chum had taken up his residence at the manor.

"It is I, and my name is Magerald," was the cutting response, indicating that Dick had taken a drink or two, and that quite recently. "If you are the man called De Bynville, I would have a private word with you down the lawn!"

Sarcasm and taunt were in the speech. The dark man understood it well enough, and only by an effort prevented an outburst of wrath.

"My name is De Bynville!" he said, "and, sir, I am with you!"

Dick Magerald led the way, and De Bynville followed, half-suspecting what was coming.

They came face to face half a hundred yards from the manor, but hidden from its view, by the shrubbery.

Dick Magerald's face, naturally handsome to look upon, was now not pleasant. It bore the double expression of untamed passion from the effects of strong drink, and passion from a natural hatred for the man he was addressing.

"De Bynville!" he said, in a tone as intense as was his burning gaze, "for what purpose did you come to Magerald Manor?"

"That is a matter of my own business!" was the sharp retort.

"As I supposed!" Dick smiled. "But, though the major may be unsuspecting and blind, his son is not. You and the madame are as precious a pair rogues and schemers as ever breathed!"

"Sir! How dare you?"

Without deigning a retort Dick went on:

"I have learned from the purest sister that ever breathed the pure air of proud old Virginia that you, a scoundrel, a rascal and a—*a nothing!*—have dared to usurp the hospitality of Magerald Manor, and openly and wantonly insulted her—her, my fair-haired, gentle sister Mildred!"

Richard Magerald was now livid with passion; he took a step nearer the accused, and shook his fist in his face; but De Bynville maintained a coolness of demeanor that was wonderful for him.

"I deny the charge most emphatically!" he said. "I never insulted your sister."

"You lie—you did! You are a black-hearted scoundrel! She told me with her own lips!" Dick cried, his indignation waxing warmer and warmer. "I'd kill you now, but that I prefer to fight you as becomes a Magerald. You scoundrel—you whelp! dare you meet me in a duel, to-morrow at sunrise, and fight me with swords?"

As he spoke, he took a quick step forward, and slapped De Bynville full in the face with the flat of his hand.

"I shall be only too happy to meet you!" De Bynville cried, his eyes fairly blazing with rage. "But I warn you, in advance, to make preparations for death, for unless you are an expert fencer I shall have no difficulty in running you through."

"Bah!" and young Magerald laughed scornfully. "The brag startles me not. If I die, it will be in defense of a sister's honor; and even in event of my failure to kill you, Hoyt Hayden remains to fill my place."

"Very well. I can as well attend to two of you as one!" De Bynville declared. "Where shall this meeting take place?"

"At the edge of the Black Swamp, and at the end of the wood road that runs from here there."

"At sunrise?"

"At sunrise."

"And with swords?"

"Yes."

"Have you a pair? I am not supplied with such weapons."

"I will furnish them."

"Very well. I will be on the ground at sunrise, sir. Good-evening!"

"Good-evening!" Dick stiffly replied, and the two men separated, going in opposite directions.

"Yes! I'll kill him!" Dick Magerald muttered. "That will remove one blighting influence from Magerald Manor. I am literally outlawed from my home, I suppose, but even so, I shall see to it that madame does not reign long at the manor."

CHAPTER VIII.

DE BYNVILLE PLOTS.

AFTER leaving Dick Magerald, Boyd de Bynville made his way out of the park and struck into the little-used road leading to Black Swamp and which branched off the main highway near the manor.

Following it for over a mile, he at length came to the ominous cedar and weeping-willow

swamp, whose treacherous sloughs and bogs and dark repute gave it its name.

The "gang" to whom Freckles had made mention dwelt therein, and the fact that the Witch Hayden resided there served to add to the hard name the place had always suffered.

Just where the widow and Hoyt Hayden lived within the almost trackless confines of the swamp very few knew.

The head-quarters of the "gang," however, were at a lonely cabin in the interior of the slough, and could only be reached by those familiar with the labyrinthian paths; also being upon what was almost an island, could be reached only by one particular path.

If on entering the dismal precincts of the swamp, with its ominous shadows and hundreds of croaking frog voices, Boyd de Bynville knew where the head-quarters of the gang were located, he did not try to reach it immediately, for he first sought a rude but commodious shanty but a few hundred yards from the edge of the swamp, where a light shone from one unshuttered window.

After a moment's pause, he rapped upon the door, which was so promptly opened as to give the suspicion that his approach had been known.

Freckles, frowsy-headed and with arms akimbo, stood in the doorway, looking saucy and aggressive.

"Hello, Mister Dude!" she saluted. "How do you feel after yer swim?"

"Is your father in?" De Bynville demanded, authoritatively, not noticing the girl's speech.

"Who d'ye mean—old Tom Shakes?" Freckles innocently inquired.

"Of course—who else is your father?"

"Dunno 'bout that. As fer Thomas, he ain't in. He shook himself over half an hour ago."

"And after I see him look out he don't shake the liver out of you!" De Bynville warned, viciously. "Where is the old man—at head-quarters?"

"Spect. Dunno."

"Where is the cabin where the 'gang' holds out?"

"Dunno."

"You are lying. You *do* know."

"What's it your business if I do know?"

"A good deal. I want you to guide me there."

"Me guide you there!"

"Why, certainly."

"An' you goin' to tell dad on me an' Flip Fred! Oh, no! Not much, you bet!"

"Nonsense. I do not intend to mention the affair of to-day. I got the worst of it, and that's all right. I want to see Shakes on important biz, and I'll give you a dollar to lead the way to the cabin."

"A dollar? Why, I can beat that, any time. Half a dozen hind-quarters ov frogs fetch that, an' the frogs take to me like fleas to a yaller dorg. They let me ketch 'em, two at a time, jest ter git their name afore the public."

"Nonsense. What will you charge to take me to the cabin?"

"Will ye agree not ter tell on me or Flip Fred—not even to mention us?"

"Certainly, I will."

"'Pon honor?"

"'Pon honor."

"Well, I'll 'scort ye for ten dollars, then. But mind, Mister Dudy, if I find out you've been squealin' on Fred an' me, and connivin' against us, look for yerself! I'm a freckle-faced terror when I git up on my mad."

"I will remember your warning," De Bynville said, dryly. "Here is a ten-dollar note—now hurry up!"

Freckles took the bill, held it to the light that shone through the doorway, and otherwise scrutinized it sharply.

"You're sure it's good?" she queried.

"Of course, it is good."

She vanished within doors, but soon returned with a lantern, and led off into the heart of the grim swamp.

As De Bynville afterward learned, there was a way to the rendezvous, the following of which did not necessitate that a person should get the feet wet.

But Freckles did not follow that trail.

She seemingly picked out the worst route she knew how, and when finally they reached the island, poor De Bynville was a sight!

He was wet to the waist and neck, having twice stuck in the mud in fording a pool and pitched forward on his face; and as for mud, he was daubed all over with it, and presented a sorry appearance.

While fairly convulsed with silent laughter, Freckles had led the way with a stoically sober

face, and when they were within a few yards of the cabin, which loomed up a trifle lighter than the uncanny gloom that surrounded it, she said:

"That's the place, yonder. I must *git*, now. If you love me, don't tell dad I guided you here!"

Then she vanished in the darkness.

With set teeth, and an execration escaping between them, De Bynville advanced and knocked upon the cabin door.

A light shone through the key-hole—otherwise the place looked deserted.

After a moment some one arose from the table inside and came toward the door.

"Who's there?" was the gruff demand.

"De Bynville!" was the answer.

Without delay the door was opened, and the dark man admitted.

There were five men present, besides the visitor—bewhiskered, middle-aged, roughly-dressed and unprepossessing men, whose hardened features and muscular figures suggested that they had passed through experiences that might best remain untold.

All seemed to recognize De Bynville, and welcomed him with an amused smile at his appearance.

The man who opened the door was Tom Shakes.

He was a gloomy yet stealthy and snakish-looking individual, with a strong form, a face suggestive of evil, and beadlike eyes.

"Is that yer, De Bynville?" he grunted, with a wry glance at the dude's outlandish plight. "How'n the mischief'd ye get here?"

"God only knows—if I may be permitted to use his name in such society!" was the growling answer. "I paid that girl of yours to fetch me here, and I am here, as you see."

An audible laugh filled the room.

Only Shakes scowled.

"Did she bring you?" he demanded.

"I said so."

"Did she go back?"

"I suppose so—she *turned* back."

Shakes left the cabin at once, closing the door after him.

It was several minutes ere the door opened and he entered.

"She's gone back!" he said, with a chuckle. "She knows better'n to hang around this neighborhood, you bet!"

And at that moment Freckles was upon the roof, looking down the chimney, and catching every word that arose from below.

Shakes snuffed the candle, pushed a chair toward De Bynville, and sat down himself.

"Well?" he said, interrogatively, "what's up?"

"Heads always!" was the reply. "I've a job for you."

"So! We were just wondering why things were so quiet."

"I have always treated you square?"

Shakes nodded assent, and the others said "yes" in concert.

"Well, I have always tried to. That's my style, you know, and I am also an observer. And, now that I want a little job done, I think I know where to find the laborers."

"Without doubt!" Shakes assented. "Me an' the boys aire always open to inducements."

"Without being particular as to the nature of the 'disease,' as long as you get the cash?"

"Correct."

"Mind, half of this cash is to come in advance, on agreement."

"So much the better. The treasury would admit a musketeer to-night."

"Well, then, to come to the point, without useless talk, what is *your price for a life*?"

The gang exchanged glances.

"For a life?" Shakes repeated. "Well, that depends largely upon circumstances—as to whose life it is, and *et ceteras*. We always like to know about all these things and the particulars of them before we take a hand, you know. We are careful, consistent, close-mouthed and reliable. That's a snail in a snail-shell. So proceed."

"You are sure all I say will remain a secret within this room?"

"Certain. No one ever comes here except my girl, and she's home!"

"Then I will open up a job for you. I want a man put so far under the sod that the powers of resurrection won't raise him!"

"That is an utter impossibility!" Tom Shakes declared. "We've potted a lot of men, I tell ye, friend, but somehow they won't stay down. We see 'em often, an' they look kinder cross-eyed at us, but we've got used ter that, an' don't mind it any more. As fer your man, we're open fer engagements!"

"Well, this man whom I want starched and done up stiff is a pack-peddler. His name is Fred Floyd."

"Yes?"

"At the present time he is under arrest for frightening Madame Magerald's horses, and causing an accident to her. He is confined in the strong-room of Magerald Manor. Can you get him out of there, and—*kill him*?"

De Bynville fairly hissed these words between his teeth.

"Oh, no!" Shakes demurred, grimly. "Give us something easier. We've tried that—it won't work. Only three persons has admission there—two by rights, the other by the agency of the devil."

"You refer to the Witch?"

"Yes."

"I have seen her once. She is a pretender—false to the core!"

"Try her once—test her infernal powers once," Shakes retorted. "One trial will convince you."

"Bah! I don't believe it. The people of this neighborhood are all superstitious fools."

"Where did you see this pack-peddler first?"

"On the bridge, above the manor."

"Was anybody else there?"

"I saw that—that girl of yours."

"The Witch was near, then!" Tom Shakes said, with a nod. "Wherever Freckles is, the Witch ain't far away. That's been proven. So, if Freckles happened to take a fancy to the peddler, it won't pay us to tackle him. We'd get beat, as sure as—election!"

"Nonsense! This witchery is all a humbug, and you're dumb to believe in it. I can tell you something that will astonish you."

"Well, what is it?"

"Have you ever heard that the person now known as Dick Magerald is not Dick Magerald at all?"

Old Shakes was silent a moment, as if he were casting his mind back over the past.

"There was a rumor," he said, finally, "that Dick was not the child of Major Magerald, but et died out, an' I guess no one ever thinks about it any more."

"How did this rumor get about?"

"Why, ye see, old Widder Hayden flung et in the major's face once, that Dick was not the heir, but that the real heir would turn up, some day. Ye see, the widder was a purty girl in her time, an' et's sed that the major wronged her under promise of marriage. However, when Dick Magerald was about to be brought into the world, Trixy—that's the widder's name—she was engaged to nurse the mother. Jim Magerald, the major's younger brother, were livin' at the manor then, but went to sea shortly afterward. Some have surmised that there might have been such a thing as Trixy sending the real heir off with Jim, with whom she was very thick, and substituting another infant in place. Anyhow, Trixy was shortly afterward kicked out o' the Magerald employ, and soon after became the Swamp Witch she is now."

De Bynville looked thoughtful.

"How old is Dick Magerald?" he asked.

"Younger than he looks. Dissipation has given him an aged look. Let me see—he's not over eighteen. Mildred is a year younger, an' she's seventeen."

"Dick looks twenty-five!"

"I know he does, but he ain't. I'm an old residenter in these parts, and orter know!"

"Well, I'll tell you my belief. Dick Magerald is not a Magerald at all, but, on the contrary, is some chap who was substituted for the real heir, as you have hinted, years ago."

"Where then is the real heir?"

"The young man who came to these parts today as a pack-peddler."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because he is the living picture of Major Magerald. I noticed it the instant I first saw him."

"Is that your own reason for ther supposition?"

"Yes, except that the fellow knows me, calls me by my right name, although I cannot remember of ever having seen him before. At all events, be he the real heir to Magerald Manor or not, he is in my way, and I'll pay you well to put him out of the way, and that, too, at once."

"How much will you pay?" Shakes demanded, grimly.

"Two hundred dollars!"

"Tain't enuff for that kind of work."

"Well, then, how much do you want?"

"Five hundred, spot cash."

"When the job's done?"

"No, *now*; right away off quick, afore we tackle the job."

"I have no such amount with me. Meet me in Fairfax to-morrow, however, and you shall have it."

"All right. Where's the feller?"

"Locked up in the strong-room at the manor."

"Then how the blazes d'ye expect us to get at him?" Shakes growled.

"Can't you effect an entrance to the strong-room from the outside?"

"No, or we'd 'a' cracked the safe long ago."

"Well, the fellow will be let out in the morning and taken to Fairfax for trial. You can tend to his case then."

"Not so easy a job ter tech him then. However, we'll be in Fairfax in the mornin', and after we've had the pleasure of fingerin' yer greenbacks we'll see what can be did wi' yer man."

"A question more ere I go: Is Hoyt Hayden the witch's son?"

"No, although he always passes as such. After she was jilted by Major Magerald, she was married to a wood-chopper named Hayden. Hoyt was his child, and after his father died always remained wi' the widder."

"Have you ever heard that he has aspirations for the hand of Mildred Magerald?"

"Yes. An' I shouldn't be s'prised if he'd win her."

"One more question—is the girl who guided me here *your* daughter?"

"She aire. What makes you ask?"

"Because she don't look like you."

"Pooh! She's like my old woman was."

"Ah! That accounts for it. I guess I'll be going now, if you'll show me the way out o' this infernal swamp."

To this old Shakes nodded, and the two men left the cabin together.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GOLDEN LOCKET.

SOON after Fred's incarceration in the strong-room at Magerald Manor, the major stepped out of the front portals and into his dog-cart, which was still waiting, and drove hastily off toward Fairfax.

His horses were quick of foot, and it was not long before the equipage drew up for the second time that evening in front of The Arms.

As before, the major got out and entered the office, behind the counter of which a bland young man presided.

"Ah! good-evening, major—ah—"

"Is Mr. Daniels about?" the major interrupted.

"Yes, sir; he is in his room."

"Tell him, then, that I desire to see him at once."

The clerk dispatched a bell-boy, and Daniels, the lessee of the hotel, soon made his appearance—a nervous, dapper little man, who looked unfitted for the important position of mine host for a place like The Arms.

He and the major stepped to one side, and the latter then said:

"See here, Daniels, I want to ask a favor of you. Will you grant it?"

"Most likely, when I know its nature," was the reply.

"Well, it is this: A young peddler stopped here to-night. What room did you assign him to?"

"Number 28, I believe."

"His traps were taken there, I suppose?"

"Yes. He had only a pack."

"Well, I want you to let me have private access to his room, long enough to examine the contents of that pack."

"Impossible, sir. That would be a breach of trust to my guest. He returned his key to the office, and I am supposed to be responsible for whatever he may have left in his room."

"All right and well. But that does not signify anything. Do I not own this hotel property, and am I not responsible? That pack, I suspect, may contain bogus money, and, as a citizen, I have a right to examine it."

"I rather question that right!" Daniels retorted, showing that he was not inclined to humor the major's request.

"Well, I don't question anything of the kind!" was the hot reply. "Remember, sir, your lease expires in two months, and unless my request is complied with, you get notice to-morrow to vacate the premises."

This caused Daniels to wince. He hesitated but a minute, and then said:

"Very well, sir; if it is a matter of compulsion, I suppose you must have your way. You must promise me one thing, however, and that is, that you will leave my guest's effects intact as you find them."

"Of course I am not in need of any of the

trash he may tote about the country. I simply wish to satisfy my curiosity."

Not doubting but what the major spoke the truth, Daniels procured the key from the office, and directed the major so that he would have no difficulty in finding Flip Fred's room.

With a peculiar gleam in his eyes, Magerald ascended the stairs, and soon was within No. 28. First he closed the door and locked it on the inside.

Then he looked about him.

Flip Fred's everyday garments lay over the back of a chair, and the pack was near at hand, upon the floor.

The major thoroughly searched the garments, first of all, but found nothing. Whatever the pockets may have contained had already been removed.

A grunt of disgust escaped the searcher, and he next undid the oilskin cloth that covered Fred's stock in trade.

In a moment all sorts of Yankee notions were spread out in front of him, comprising various necessities of a ladies' work-basket, toilet and so forth.

Major Magerald searched them carefully over, never missing an article.

At last he came across something that caused him an eager start. It was a small pasteboard box, with the cover tied on with a bit of blue ribbon.

He quickly slipped off this ribbon, and lifted the cover.

Then Magerald uttered a low, exultant cry.

Inside, on a bed of cotton, reposed a small golden locket and chain.

On the cover were engraved the letters "R. M." Inside the locket there were no likenesses, but a tiny scrap of light brown hair was inserted under one of the glasses.

"By heaven! My suspicions have not proven me false!" the major said, fondling the locket.

A wild, discordant laugh caused him to glance toward the window with a smothered oath, and his face wore an expression of horror, as he beheld, pressed against the pane, the hard visage of the Witch of the Black Swamp.

Only for an instant—then it had disappeared.

As soon as he could recover from the shock of surprise, Magerald hastened to the window, raised it, and looked out.

A roofer's ladder, leaning against the rear of the hotel, showed how the Witch had reached the window.

But she was now nowhere to be seen.

Major Magerald went back to the pack, put the box and its contents into his pocket, and carefully did up the pack as he had found it, which consumed several minutes of time.

He then left the room, and went down-stairs, passed out of the rear hall door, and carefully reconnoitered the vicinity, to no purpose.

Returning the key at the office, he entered the dog-cart and drove slowly back to Magerald Manor.

"I must interview that young man before I sleep," he muttered, "and see what he knows relative to the locket. Then Trixy Hayden shall speak the truth, or she shall suffer the tortures of the damned—that's settled!"

When he reached the manor he went direct to his own apartment, and rung for Sleuth.

The old colored servitor promptly answered the summons, and stood in waiting.

"Gnome!" the master said, arousing from a reverie, "has everybody retired for the night?"

"All 'cept de guest, sah."

"De Bynville?"

"Yes, sah."

"Where is he?"

"Don't know, sah. Went away early in de ebenin'."

"What do you think of the fellow?"

"Not much, sah!"

"Don't like the looks of him, eh?"

"No, sah—jes' odderwise."

"Nor I. His presence here is an intrusion, and I presume the sooner I invite him to go the better. Have you caught him in anything suspicious?"

"Once, sah."

"Ah! What was it?"

"Found him in de hall near de strong-room, sah."

"The deuce! What was he doing?"

"Comin' from to'ard de door, sah."

"Did he say anything?"

"Said 'he'd got mixed up, an' axed could I tell him how to reach his room.' I did so."

"That was all a blind. Gnome, I believe that scamp is here with a view to robbing me."

The negro remained silent.

"Yes, that's just what I believe," the major went on, "and the fact that he and the madame

are so thick looks additionally suspicious. For I'll be confidential with you, Gnome, and tell you that I am satisfied that all the madame married me for was my money."

"Spect mebbe you's right, sah."

"I am growing more and more positive of it every day. At any rate, you keep an eye on the movements of the madame and De Bynville, and I'll consider what is best to do. Did you lock the young man in the strong-room as I directed?"

"Yes, sah—bofe ob 'em!"

"Both of them?" the major echoed.

"Yes, sah!"

"Why, thunderation! I didn't tell you to lock the constable up!"

"I thought you'd did, sah!"

"By no means. Go release Jones and let him go home. Then go back and tell the peddler I want to see him here. Look out he don't elude you!"

Gnome left the room.

In a moment, seemingly, he was back, appearing nervous and excited.

"You'd better come, sah, an' see fo' you'self!" he announced. "One ob de prisoners have escaped!"

"Escaped?" the major cried, leaping to his feet. "Which one?"

"De young man, sah!"

The two hurried at once to the strong-room, and entered, there to find Jones about the most frightened-looking person that could be imagined.

"What in the infernal furies is the matter here, and where is the prisoner?" the major demanded, angrily.

"Why in the infernal furies was I locked up?" Jones demanded, in return.

"That was through a mistake. My servant understood my order that you were both to be locked up. But explain. Where is young Floyd gone?"

"I don't know, nor care. He's gone wi' the devil!"

"Nonsense! Out with it. You can and must explain!"

"Well, this is all I know about it. He an' I was settin' here, talkin', when we heard a wild laugh that made chills run down my back. 'In Heaven's name, what's that?' I axed. 'Have you heard of the Witch of the Black Swamp?' my companion asked—'an' the magic star?' I told him yes, an' then he cried: 'Behold, I have the magic star, and my liberty is at hand!' I looked quickly toward the door, expecting nothing more or less than to see the devil appear, horns, tail an' all. But the door didn't open, and when I looked around again, the other had vanished, an' I was alone. You kin bet I was skeart!"

"This is incredible!" the major gasped, pale in spite of himself. "Days of miracles have passed, and I'll swear there's no way a human being could go out of here except through the doorway. Gnome, take the light, and see if the lock shows any signs of having been tampered with."

The negro obeyed.

He reported directly that there was no evidence of the lock having been tampered with; in fact the door could not be opened, except from the hall, outside.

"I tell ye he didn't git out by the doorway!" Jones stoutly asserted. "I orter know, when I was lookin' straight at the door, and it didn't open!"

"Did you see the alleged magic star?"

"Ay! ay!"

"Describe it!"

"It was a gold star, with raised center, and curious engraving upon the prongs, and a gleaming diamond in the center!"

The major turned whiter still, and reeled back a pace, with an audible gasp of astonishment.

He quickly recovered himself, however.

"Gnome, try the safe doors!" he said, in a husky tone. "One of them may have inadvertently been left unlocked, and the fellow could squeeze himself inside."

Gnome obeyed, and pronounced each door to be locked.

"Open them!" the major growled.

One by one the negro manipulated the combination knobs, and opened the ponderous doors.

A glance, by candle-light, into each safe, satisfied the master that the contents were safe, and the doors were closed and locked.

"There is some infernal mystery here that surpasses my comprehension!" the major then said. "It is evident that in some unaccountable manner young Floyd has escaped. How, or by what means, I cannot conceive, for the walls of this room are of solid masonry. However, he is

gone, and must be recaptured, at all hazards. You may not know it, Jones, but this star you describe was for generations a family heirloom, and much of the Magerald wealth accrued was ascribed to the star's influence. It disappeared, about eighteen years ago, and no trace could ever be found of it, although I always believed it to have been stolen by my younger brother, who mysteriously disappeared at that time. It is undoubtedly the old heirloom which this vagabond peddler possesses, and I mean to get it back if I have to raise heaven and earth. Go, then, at once, and set men to work in search for the peddler, and when day dawns let notices be put up in Fairfax, and every cross-roads in the county, describing the fellow, and offering a hundred—ay! two hundred dollars reward for his apprehension. Go at once, and spare no pains to effect his recapture, and you shall be paid, liberally!"

"Very well, sir. You can depend upon it that I will leave no stone unturned!" Jones announced, and then he was shown to the door by the negro, and took his departure.

CHAPTER X.

FRED AND THE WITCH.

No doubt the reader is curious to know what became of Flip Fred after vanishing within the great iron safe, as recorded in a previous chapter. But they can be no more curious than was Fred himself to know what was to become of him.

For an instant after the ponderous door closed in behind him there was an awful silence, and a smothering sensation crept over him.

Then a hand clutched his arm, and the voice he had heard before said:

"Come! Walk careful!"

He followed, and they proceeded a few steps, then he heard another sound, as if another ponderous iron door had closed.

The next moment a glare of light from a dark lantern dazzled his eyes. As soon as he was able to recover his vision, however, he saw that he was in the presence of Witch Hayden, and that they were in a very small room in the rear of the identical safe he had entered, and he saw, moreover, that the rear section of the safe was hinged, and exactly like the front part, even to the knob combination.

Almost at their feet a narrow spiral stairway descended through a hole in the stone floor, into utter darkness.

"Follow me!" the Witch ordered, "and be careful you do not fall, or you would break your neck, and I would be cheated out of my revenge!"

"What do you mean—what do you know about me?" Fred began; but she interrupted with a wave of her hand, and started to descend the dizzy iron staircase.

"Ask no questions!" she said, without looking back. "I am your friend, and you will know all in good time."

Fred felt constrained to follow, but his mind was in a state of mystification and wonderment.

Down, down they went, until they finally reached another apartment about as large as the one above. One side here was a board partition, however.

Turning her light low, the Witch applied her ear to the partition and listened for several minutes; then she touched a secret spring, the partition moved to one side, and she pushed Fred forward and followed herself, closing the partition behind her.

They were in what appeared to be a large summer kitchen, and which was now devoted to the storage of tubs, buckets and other laundry appurtenances.

A door opened upon the rear grounds of the estate.

There was no person in the room, and enjoining Fred to silence, the Witch opened the door, and they stepped out beneath the stars.

The old guide then led the way direct to a most lonely part of the park, where she halted, and turned and eyed Flip Fred narrowly.

"Young man, you are free!" she announced.

"Kinder looks that way," Fred assented, not knowing what else to say.

"Yes, you're free, but only for a short time, unless you go according to my directions. Magerald has lost you, but he'll have you again if he can get you, no matter if he has to spend a thousand dollars."

"Why, how is that? Is he such a vindictive man?"

"To enemies, yes. He will have every part of the country scoured, but what he will find you."

"And why is this?"

"Because he went to the hotel to-night, gained

entrance to your room, opened your pack, and secured the golden locket you carried!"

"He did that—Major Magerald?" Fred gasped, in surprise and indignation.

"He did. I shadowed his every movement, saw him take it, and got back here by a short path, just in time to rescue you before he could visit your prison."

"I cannot understand all this. Why did he want the locket?"

"It tells him who you are, and I warn you, if you are retaken, your life won't be worth insuring."

Fred drew a hard breath.

"This is all an enigma to me. For God's sake, good woman, if you know anything about me, tell me."

"All in good time. You cling to the magic star, and be faithful to me, and do as I bid, and ere many days pass the whole story of your life will be an open letter to you. Promise to obey all my directions to the letter and I will tell you something more, even now, that will astonish you!"

Fred hesitated. What did it all mean? Was he bewitched? Was this hag really his friend? Should he promise obedience to her wishes, without knowing what she might exact of him?

Freckles had said that the Witch was his friend.

He passed his hand thoughtfully over his forehead, and then said:

"Yours is a strange request, but since you have gone to the trouble to get me out of the manor, I will say this: In so far as I am not asked to enter into any criminal or objectionable act, for the present I will be guided by you."

"Good! You will have nothing to do but lie in hiding. Then, when I am all ready, you shall reign yonder as master!"

"What?" Fred gasped.

"I have said it. But ask me no more questions, for I cannot answer them. Fly, now, to the swamp, and hide in some dense tree-top. Searchers will not look for you on the outskirts. I can find you when I want you. Do not tire if you do not see me till after daybreak. I have much to do. And now, before I go, give me the sealed package you carry about your person!"

Fred started violently.

"What do you know about that?" he demanded.

"I know you were sent with it, and to bring it to Fairfax. I know the man who sent it, and who it is for!"

"Who sent it?"

"A man who was from your earliest recollection your friend—a tall, manly fellow, with one cross-eye."

"And his name?" Fred demanded, eagerly.

"You knew him as Mart Monk!"

"And who is the package sent to?"

"Trixy Telford! That was my name in my younger days."

Flip Fred drew the large envelope from an inner pocket, and gave it her, for he remembered that Constable Jones spoke of her as Trixy.

"I guess the package was for you. But Mart Monk, onto his deathbed, hinted that it contained something relative to myself."

"It may—but of that, more hereafter. Be off now before it is too late, and under no circumstances expose yourself until you see me again!"

She turned, then, and vanished among the trees, leaving Fred to do as she had directed—seek refuge in the Black Swamp.

"Perhaps I have done wrong in giving the old gal the document!" he muttered, as he vaulted over the fence that surrounded Magerald Park, and set off in the direction where Freckles had advised him the Black Swamp was located; "but it appears, at any rate, that she's more of a friend to me than Major Magerald. But what does she mean? Can it be that I am a Magerald? She said I would be master at the manor! That would seem to signify that I am a Magerald. And the locket, too—for on its case is 'R. M.' But, strangest of all, if I am an heir, why is it the major is my enemy? Why should he wish to persecute his own son and heir? Ah! it's a puzzling mystery to me!"

He reached the edge of the forbidding swamp without incident, where the wood-road started out.

Here he found a huge cedar tree, and was soon comfortably ensconced far up among its protecting branches.

The tree was on the very outer edge of the marsh, and close by the roadside; and he had chosen it because if any enemies did come in pursuit, they would be apt to come by the road, and not expecting to find him short of the center of the swamp, would pass on into it, and thus he

would have a chance to see them without being seen himself.

He did not go to sleep.

The night was so far advanced that he knew it would not be long till daylight, when he would need to be vigilant—so he banished all thought of sleep.

No one approached, to his knowledge, during the remainder of the night, and he was so busied with perplexed thought that morning was beginning to break ere he had taken any notice how fast the time had passed.

The sun was just beginning to throw its first warm rays over the beautiful landscape when some person came down the road and stopped beneath the big cedar.

Peering down from his perch, Flip Fred was able to make him out.

It was Madame Magerald's favored guest, Boyd de Bynville, dressed with scrupulous care, and looking every inch a dude!

CHAPTER XI.

THE DUEL AND THE ARREST.

FLIP FRED was not a little surprised to see De Bynville, more especially as he was alone. Had he been accompanied by companions the boy would naturally have concluded that the party were searching for him; but the man did not appear to be searching for any one.

He glanced at his watch and sat down on a rock in under the tree, evidently to wait for some one.

At the end of ten minutes another man approached from up the road, and as he drew near De Bynville arose.

Fred's position was such that he could see both without being seen himself; but never having seen Richard Magerald, he did not recognize him. As the new-comer carried two handsome swords, Fred at once decided that the meeting was to be—a duel.

"Magerald, you are late!" De Bynville said, in a patronizing tone.

"It matters little, as long as I am here," was the retort. "Are you ready for business?"

"Quite ready, thank you."

"Very well. You can have your choice of weapons, as both are alike!"

And Magerald cast the polished blades on the ground at his enemy's feet.

"Oh, I'm not particular; either will do me," De Bynville returned carelessly, picking up the one nearest to him.

Dick Magerald seized the other.

"Now, then," De Bynville remarked, "let's understand each other. Is this to be a friendly little bout, to satisfy honor, or is it to be life to the best man, and death to the other?"

"Life and death!" was the terse response.

"As you like, though for my part, and your sake, I'd far rather have it the other way."

"Bah! you lie, you coward! You'd as soon kill me as to look at me—and ditto here."

"Correct. We will to business. According to the code under which I was disciplined, we should shake hands, retreat ten paces each, backward, and then advance."

"Bah! I'd scorn to touch your hand! Retreat as we face!"

Both men retreated step for step—then, when the ten paces had been made, each advanced, and the glittering blades crossed with a clash.

Up in the tree Flip Fred looked down with feelings indescribable. He knew it would be useless to interfere, and there was every likelihood that one man would kill the other—a sight he preferred not to witness. But, how avoid it?

Clash! clash! clash!

The contest had begun in good earnest, as the ringing and flashing of the blades in the morning sunlight but too clearly witnessed.

Both men evidently were skilled in the use of the weapon, for in five minutes' combat neither had succeeded in pricking the other.

This could not last long, however. The better man must eventually distinguish himself by superioremendurance.

And this man proved to be Boyd de Bynville.

After seven minutes of fierce stroke, counter-stroke, thrust, feint and parry, he got in so heavy a blow on Magerald's defense as to snap the opposing weapon off at the hilt, and in another instant De Bynville's sword pierced the young Virginian's breast—literally run him through.

Poor Dick threw up his arms with a wild shriek and fell backward to the ground.

His death must have been almost instantaneous, for he did not stir after he fell.

Boyd de Bynville gazed at him a moment rather pityingly, then a harsh laugh broke from his lips.

"The poor devil brought it on himself!" he said, aloud, with a keen glance around him, "and his death be on his own shoulders!"

Then, dropping his sword, he walked quickly away down the road toward the manor and was soon lost to view.

Seeing that young Magerald did not stir, Flip Fred was seriously contemplating getting down out of the tree, when he heard footsteps approaching, and Hoyt Hayden came striding out of the swamp!

A cry of consternation and horror escaped him as he came suddenly and unexpectedly upon the scene of the duel.

"Great Heaven! what does this mean?" he cried. "Dick Magerald, as I live! and dead at that! He has been fighting a duel and has got the worst of it. I wonder whom he could have met?"

He picked up De Bynville's sword, and stood gazing at the blood-stained blade in horror.

As he stood thus a party of six men burst suddenly out of the swamp, and, taking in the situation at a glance, as they supposed, rushed upon Hayden with victorious yells.

He turned and essayed to keep them off, but by a force of numbers, they swept him from his feet.

In an instant more handcuffs were upon his wrists, and he was helpless.

The men were a party of villagers, six in number, headed by Constable Jones.

They had already been searching in the swamp for Flip Fred, having penetrated it half a mile below.

"Aha! So we've caught you in the act, have we?" Jones cried, triumphantly, for he had a settled dislike for Hayden.

"No, you haven't caught me in the act!" Hoyt declared, fiercely. "I arrived on the spot but the very minute before you did, and found Magerald lying as you see him. I had picked up the bloody sword to examine it the moment you rushed upon me."

"Bah! don't try to stuff us with that!" Jones grunted, as he arose from beside Dick. "Magerald is dead, but he ain't cold yet, an' the act's jest bin did. No one's in sight, an' so et's plain enough it were you who slew Dick Magerald. You'll have to go 'long wi' us."

Flip Fred heard all this, and, for a moment, was tempted to descend from the tree and explain matters; but what good would it do?

Of course Jones and his gang would not believe him, and if they did, they would no doubt arrest him on Major Magerald's account, which he suspected was their mission.

So it was eminently the wisest course for him to remain silent for the present, since he might tell what he knew more advantageously in the future.

He allowed the party to move away, with Hoyt Hayden a prisoner.

Two of the men lifted Dick Magerald's stiffening corpse, and bore it away toward the manor.

When the whole party were out of sight, Fred was considering what was best to do, when he heard a voice below, and beheld, to his joy and surprise—Freckles!

"Come down!" she called. "There's no one about."

Fred at once descended, and they shook hands, warmly.

"How did you discover that I was up in the tree?" Fred asked.

"Oh! I spied yer there before the duel, but didn't git a chance to speak, fer De Bynville came along."

"Then you were a witness to the duel?"

"You bet I was!"

"That is most fortunate!" Fred declared.

"You will be one more witness toward clearing young Hayden."

"Humph! He'll get free all right when his trial comes off. The Witch see'd the fight, too. She an' I were both hidin' over yonder in the edge of the swamp."

"Where is she now?"

"Gone on inter the swamp, to her castle. She sent me ter you."

"Is there no danger of our encountering another band of searchers?"

"None. Come along."

Flip Fred did not hesitate to obey.

He was now aware that an active search for him was being made, and doubted not but what, were he captured, he would be imprisoned, if indeed nothing worse happened him; so he followed Freckles into the labyrinths of the grim and treacherous swamp.

She led the way more carefully now than she had done for De Bynville, and Fred neither got wet, muddy, nor had his clothes torn.

For nearly an hour they threaded their way

into the fastness, and the further they entered its recesses the wilder grew its aspect.

As they advanced Fred could but note that Freckles was considerably improved in her personal appearance.

She had on a neatly-fitting gingham dress, shoes and stockings, her face was clean and her hair very charmingly combed and arranged.

She now looked really very pretty.

"I wonder if she fixed up on my account?" Fred mused. "By Jove! I am more taken up with her than I ever was with a girl before. I wonder if she wouldn't make a good wife—providing, of course, I were to turn out to be a Magerald, of Magerald Manor, with a competency to live on?"

The idea had occurred to him more than once before, and now was by no means an unpleasant one.

To be sure she was wild and uncultured, but a little time and pains would fit her for any position, seeing how mentally bright she was.

But, after all, mused our young peddler, wasn't he counting his chickens prematurely? Perhaps he was not a Magerald—not even a near approach to one.

At last their tramp was ended. They stood at the door of a well-built log cabin, which was surrounded by a slough of deep dark water, crossed by a narrow, movable bridge.

This bridge had not been drawn, and Fred and his guide had thus been able to reach the island without trouble.

To Freckles's rap on the door there came a sharp order to "Come in!" and they entered Witch Hayden's home.

Fred had rather expected to see an extraordinary place, but was disappointed.

The cabin was pleasantly furnished, and nothing savored of witchery, unless it was the widow Hayden herself and the blinking poll-parrot perched on her shoulder.

The widow was seated at a table, with some documents spread out before her, which she gathered up and placed in an envelope as Fred and Freckles entered.

There proved to be a fourth person—a smooth-faced, elderly and ministerial-looking individual, who glanced occasionally at the alleged Witch in a way that seemed to argue that he was anxious to get through with his business at the cabin and depart.

The widow motioned Fred to a seat, and then turned and regarded him steadily.

"You was a witness to the duel?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Who killed Dick Magerald?"

"A man known hereabouts as Boyd de Bynville."

"And Hoyt had no hand in the affair?"

"No; he was not even a witness of it."

"You are right. But is this De Bynville possessed of another name?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"The name I know him by is—"

Some heavy object fell against the cabin door just then, with force enough to have burst it in.

CHAPTER XII.

SHAKES "THROWS UP HIS HAND."

WITCH HAYDEN quickly sprang to her feet, a peculiar expression flitting over her visage.

"What was it?" both Freckles and Fred asked, in a breath.

"I will see!" was the grim reply, and advancing to the door, she flung it open.

A sight was then revealed.

Partly upon the door-step, and partly upon the ground, lay the prostrate figure of old Tom Shakes.

He was evidently in a state of utter insensibility, and his face and hands were covered, and his garments saturated with his life-blood.

"Ha! there's been bad work here!" the Witch cried, excitedly. "It's Tom Shakes, and he's all knifed up. Help me in with him!"

She addressed Flip Fred.

He at once came to her assistance, and they carried Shakes into the cabin, and laid him on a lounge.

Freckles went and knelt beside him, in awed silence.

The Witch hastily set to work applying restoratives, of which she appeared to have a good stock, and after some five minutes' hard work on her part, the swamp terror once more opened his eyes and glanced at those who were gathered around.

Then a sigh of apparent relief escaped him.

"You're all here, I see!" he said, faintly.

"We are!" the widow replied. "But speak of yourself—are you badly hurt? and who did it?"

"Yes, I'm all stabbed to pieces, and won't hold out many minutes. The gang did it, an' made no half-way work of it, neither. I thought I'd never be able to get here, I bled so!"

"What did they set onto ye for?" the widow demanded, eagerly.

"'Cause I refused to have a hand in murderin' him!" and he pointed one bloody finger at Flip Fred. "De Bynville came last night, and wanted the young feller killed. We finally agreed to do the job for five hundred. Afterward I told the boys I'd have no hand in it, and the result was a free fight. As ye see, I got the worst of it!"

Then there followed a brief silence, when Shakes spoke again:

"Sally!"

The girl arose and bent over him.

"Well, daddy?"

"Sally, I've got something to say to you afore I throw up my hand. I've been purty tough an' harsh to you sometimes, gal!"

"Oh, don't mention it, daddy; it's all past and forgiven."

"Thankee, girl! Them's sweet words to my ears. Sally, the neighbors have long cast hints that ye weren't my child!"

"Yes."

"Well, they were wrong. You are my own child, and your mother—yer legal mother—is there!" and he nodded toward the Witch.

"She my mother?" Sally gasped, in astonishment.

"Jest so! The widder an' I hitched up in double harness, shortly after Hayden died, though it weren't generally known, and you were the result of our union; but we didn't hitch well, and after you were born we come to a settlement by which I paid your mother a sum o' money an' tuk you, and she dropped out. As you know, however, the old woman has watched over you, off and on, all the time, like a mother."

"So she has!" and rising, Freckles embraced the Witch.

Shakes went on:

"Yer mother allus counted on providin' a good husband fer ye," he said, "and so I've never put a finger in the pie, but let her manage to suit you and herself. She's finally picked out a likely young feller, and I approve of her choice. "Young man," turning to Flip Fred, "thar you see the gal—our Sally—as she is. She ain't no high-fangled beauty, ner ain't yet polished up ter shine in society. But she's as good as she looks, and it is Witch Hayden's desire that you marry her—and I, on my death-bed, second the motion!"

Fred knew not what to say. He was confused—bewildered—at loss how to answer, and looked from one to the other, in a mute, appealing way.

Sally was looking nervously at the floor and her cheeks were burning scarlet.

Shakes and the Witch were regarding the boy narrowly.

"Why—why," he began, stammeringly, "I have had no thought of getting married yet a while; I am only—"

"You are over eighteen!" the Witch spoke up.

"True. But I could not think of incumbering myself with a wife until I was able to support her."

"Boy, here are papers to prove that you are Richard Magerald, stolen from your parents in infancy, and now the only heir direct to the vast Magerald estates. Mildred is not a Magerald at all. She was adopted after you were stolen. So you see, by marrying Sally you get both a worthy girl for your wife and a welcome at Magerald Manor."

"How so, if the major is my enemy?"

"Leave that to me. I, and I alone, can pave the way for your hearty welcome with your bride."

"Supposing I refuse to marry?"

"Then I destroy these papers and with them your identity, and you go out upon the world again a nameless peddler."

"It would seem that this plot originated long ago!" Fred observed.

The Witch did not answer. Her face had become strangely hard and set.

After a few moments of deliberate thought, Fred crossed over to Sally and took both her hands in his.

"Sally," he said, "what do you say to this singular bargain? Do you think you would be perfectly satisfied and willing to become my wife without having known me any longer than you have?"

She remained silent, with gaze bent upon the floor, and her cheeks like blushing roses.

She did not release her hands, however, and after a moment her cherry lips slightly moved and she said:

"Yes; if you really love me, and will let me love you."

He gazed at her fondly for a moment, then turned to the Witch.

"Very well," he announced; "I accept the conditions, so we may as well go ahead with this matter without delay, for if I mistake not, you have anticipated the result and provided a minister."

"Yes. This gentleman is the Reverend Mr. Hoover, of Fairfax."

As it was plain that Tom Shakes was rapidly sinking, the marriage ceremony was performed without delay, and Fred and Sally received the outlaw's dying blessing.

Mr. Hoover remained until Tom Shakes died, and during his last moments administered such spiritual consolation as he could.

Then, after life was extinct, the minister, guided by the Witch, departed for Fairfax and notified the authorities to take charge of the remains.

They did so during the afternoon, piloted by the Witch, and removed the body to Fairfax, where an inquest would have to be held.

Constable Jones, of course, searched Mother Hayden's abode for Flip Fred, but the wily woman had taken the precaution to secrete the newly-married couple on an island the existence of which no one knew but herself.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WITCH'S VENGEANCE.

THE excitement caused by the death of Dick Magerald was tremendous, and the same could be said of Hoyt Hayden for participating in the affair of honor, for Constable Jones told his story of the arrest so cleverly that scarcely a person in Fairfax had a doubt but Hayden's hand had slain Dick Magerald.

Hayden was incarcerated in a room at the hotel, and a strong guard was placed over him. Here he was kept until the arrival of the sheriff from the county town, where were the jail and court-house.

Hayden bore up under his arrest proudly.

He emphatically protested his innocence when approached on the subject, and appeared to have no fears for the future.

At Magerald Manor, about the same time the real Richard Magerald was being married, his unfortunate predecessor of the same name lay in a magnificent rosewood casket.

Clad in somber black, Gnome, the colored servant, sat beside the corpse, and kept the vigil of the dead.

The major entered occasionally, stately and noiseless, yet seldom remained more than a couple of minutes at a time.

Mildred, utterly broken down with grief, kept to her room.

The madame, too, was "indisposed," and Boyd de Bynville had expressed a horror of the dead, so kept closely to his room. Guilty wretch, he dared not look upon the man he had killed.

Mildred, after the first paroxysm of grief at Dick's untimely fate—for they had always been warmly attached to each other—ordered her own carriage and drove away to Fairfax, unknown to her father.

At Fairfax she made a strong effort to get an interview with Hoyt Hayden, but her appeal was refused by Constable Jones, whose dignity had largely augmented in the past few hours, and who honestly believed that he was the most important personage in all Fairfax.

So, sorrowfully, poor Mildred drove back to the grim old manor, which seemed to look more frowning and portentous than ever, now that Dick was dead, and retired to the privacy of her own chamber, where to battle with two griefs—the death of a brother, and the imprisonment of a lover.

Dick was to be buried on the morrow, when the neighbors and friends would be permitted to view the remains for the first. This was a Magerald family custom of long standing.

Lying in his casket, the unfortunate young man did not look as if he had suffered much pain, and was as one quietly and peacefully asleep.

Major Magerald entered the parlor about half an hour before sunset. If the blow of Richard's death had affected him deeply, he did not show it, for except a slight pallor, his face wore that same calm look it ever maintained.

After gazing silently at the face in the casket a few minutes, he said to Gnome:

"I am going out for a stroll about the grounds,

and on my return will relieve you until the night-watchers come."

Gnome bowed, and the major quitted the house.

It was not so much for recreation that Major Magerald wandered along the shady and flower-bordered walks, as it was to get out of the oppression and gloom that pervaded the manor.

With his head bowed and his hands clasped behind him, he walked along without heed to where he was going, until at length he found himself at the furthest limits of the grounds.

Then, as he turned to retrace his steps, there was a rustling of the bushes, and a woman stepped out and confronted him.

He uttered a little cry of astonishment.

It was the Witch of the Black Swamp.

"Ha! you!" the major gasped, sternly, "and here in my grounds?"

"Yes, I, and here in your grounds," was the reply. "I have come for an interview. Shall we have it here, or in your private library?"

"I am not aware that there is any occasion for an interview between us, woman. What in Satan's name do you want?"

"Nothing in Satan's name, sir. I have come to have a thorough talk with you—something I have not done in eighteen years. I have come, too, on business."

"Relative to the release of your son, I suppose. I shall have to inform you, madam, that I have nothing to do in the matter. The law must take its course."

"I have not come to talk to you about Hoyt Hayden. There is ample evidence to clear him and criminate the right man, when the proper time comes. It is more especially about your son that I have come to talk."

"I do not care to talk of him—not with you, at any rate. He is dead, poor boy. I propose to let bygones be bygones in his case."

"Bah! it is not of him I would talk, but of the *real* Richard Magerald, who disappeared almost immediately after birth, and for whom another infant was substituted."

"Ha! woman, what is that you say? How dare you utter such an infamous, preposterous falsehood?"

"Bah! don't try to play up tragic with me, Magerald. You have always half believed that another child was put in place of your own—seeing how little Dick resembled you."

"'Tis false! false as—"

"Tut! tut! If you had faith and was fully satisfied that he who is dead was your own son, born of your first wife, what caused you to go to the Fairfax Arms, and search the peddler's pack for the locket which was given to young Richard the day after he was born?"

The major winced and looked nervously around him.

"Come with me!" he said, grimly. "There's no telling who may be lurking about the grounds."

So saying, he led the way toward the manor.

They entered by a side door and ascended to the third floor by a stairway that was seldom used.

Then they traversed several hallways and finally entered a large room. Within this room there was another room, a circular office, as it were.

A person shut up within this could talk loudly without fear of being heard.

Into this the major conducted the Witch, locked the door, and lit a lamp.

When they were seated he said:

"Now, then, I want a thorough and unhesitating explanation of all this matter. I'll have it, or you never leave here alive, as sure as my name is Magerald."

The Witch laughed dryly.

"You talk foolishly!" she said. "You couldn't kill me if you were to try. But enough. You shall know all from the first."

"Years ago you, Maximilian Magerald, loved a pretty girl named Trixy Telford, or, at least, you claimed to love her, and she earnestly loved you in return. Unfortunately she was a poor girl, while you were a scion of the proud old house of Magerald."

"Fearful of openly marrying Trixy Telford, lest you should incur the paternal wrath and be disinherited in favor of your younger brother, Jim, you proposed a secret marriage."

"Trixy Telford was an honest, highly honorable girl, and refused to wed you unless she wed you openly, and be received into your home. Did you marry her? No! You cast her aside at the expense of breaking her heart, and within a month after married another. Poor Trixy! She was then pointed out as one of your cast-off flames, and folks ridiculed her for 'not having

better sense than to suppose that she could marry a Magerald."

"All this imbibed her against the world and its heartlessness, until finally she grew desperate, and retiring one night to the solitudes, she registered an oath that was destined to control all her future."

"This was the oath:

"*By all the powers of Almighty God, and by all the powers of Satan, I, Trixy Telford, hereby register an oath that one of mine own flesh and blood shall yet reign at Magerald Manor as a Magerald!*"

The major started; but his face was inscrutable, and he made no reply.

So the Witch went on:

"After that I, Trixy Telford, had but to wait and bide my time. I knew it would come, sooner or later, and I was content. The time came at last. A new heir was born to Magerald Manor."

"I was known to be an excellent nurse, and was called upon to attend my lady and readily accepted the call, nor was I unprepared, for I had anticipated and laid my plot carefully."

"Your young wife lay for a week at death's door, and I had sole charge of the infant. Aided by a confederate, it was an easy matter to smuggle off the real heir and substitute a pretty babe from the almshouse at M—."

"Your confederate?" the major quietly asked.

"Was your brother Jim. He was wild and reckless, you know, and understanding that he was to be disinherited, had decided to pull out into the world for himself. I persuaded him to enter into my scheme, and take the child away and adopt it, where it could be found when wanted. He didn't love you much, as you well know, and he finally consented, providing I would get him the Magic Star of the Mageralds to give him luck."

"Well, I got it for him—it matters not how—and he disappeared. Your child went with him. When the star was missed I was suspected of having it; but it could not be found, and I was kicked out of Magerald Manor, branded a thief. I didn't care for that much, knowing in years after a sweeter revenge was in store for me."

"Well, Jim took the boy East, put it out to board with a country family, and managed to scrape enough together to pay its board. When it was six years old Jim retook possession of it, and they began a wandering life. Heaven only knows where they didn't go. Now they were at the further ends of the world; then again they'd be back in America. Sometimes Jim was flush, and at others dead broke, and whenever thus, he'd always write me, and I always had a snug sum put by to help him out."

"At last he sent me back the talisman. He said it didn't give him much luck, and I'd better take charge of it—said the boy gave him more luck than anything else."

"Well we kept up occasional correspondence until six years ago, when he ceased to write, and I heard no more of him until two months ago, when he wrote me that he did not expect to live long, and in event of his death the boy would come back to me, as I had originally ordered."

"But, to make the story complete, I must turn back."

"After leaving Magerald Manor I went back to my home in the swamp. In time I married Hayden, the wood-cutter, and he soon died, leaving me his son, and a larger sum of money than any one supposed he possessed. Six months after his death I married Tom Shakes, because I could not well live there alone."

Major Magerald looked astonished.

"The marriage was never known outside the swamp. Shakes and I didn't get along harmoniously together, and finally, after our little girl was born, we agreed to quit each other, he paying a good sum for the possession of the child. I, however, watched over her welfare, and she grew up to be a bright and attractive girl."

"Then Sally Shakes is your child?"

"She is, and perhaps now you may begin to see where the culmination of my triumph comes in."

"I see nothing," was the reply. "Go on."

"Well, yesterday the original Richard Magerald arrived in this valley, known, however, to himself and others as Fred Floyd, a pack-peddler."

"I had known of his coming for a few days, and met him, first, at the bridge, and soon, again, at Fairfax, where I caused him to become possessed of the Magic Star. But how did you come to suspect him?"

"I was in the park as he passed, and his face was so much like the Mageralds that I made up

my mind to find out as much about him as I could. As you said, a while ago, I have never been quite satisfied that Dick was my son, he being so wholly unlike in all things the old stock of Mageralds."

"Then you are satisfied, now, in regard to what I have told you?"

"I don't know whether I am or not. My confidence in your veracity is not entire."

"Bah! Then examine these documents. They are reproductions or duplicates, sent to me by your brother, through the young heir. They relate as to Jim's part in the matter. I have the originals put safely away."

Major Magerald ran over them carefully and rapidly. They had been reproduced by damp impression, on copying paper, and the major's face betrayed that he recognized his wayward brother's chirography.

"Well?" the Witch interrogated, when he had finished.

"There is no longer any doubt in my mind about the correctness of your revelation. Where is my son?"

"Where you cannot see him until you hear more. You remember the wording of my oath, nineteen long years ago? Well, I consummated my vengeance to-day. Your son married my daughter!"

"Woman! you are lying to me?" and the major's face grew suddenly white.

"No, I am not. They took a fancy to each other, and, at my suggestion, were married to-day, by Mr. Hoover, of Fairfax."

Proud old Major Magerald uttered a stifled groan, and buried his face in his hands, remaining thus for several minutes.

"It isn't such a bad match, after all!" the Witch went on. "I have given each of them five thousand dollars out of my own pocket, to start in life with, and now all rests with you. If you give them a warm welcome to Magerald Manor, as your children, they will be glad to come. If not, with me they start to-morrow for parts unknown, and you shall never again set eyes on your son. I have yet fifty thousand dollars, and as long as I live they shall never know the meaning of want. I await your answer. Shall your son and my daughter reign at Magerald Manor, or shall they not?"

Major Magerald arose from his chair, rather feebly it appeared, and looked down at the woman who had humbled his pride as it had never been humbled before.

"Trixy!" he said, hoarsely, "I acknowledge that you have won your point, and I bow gracefully to your superior powers of scheming and managing. If it is true that I wronged you, years ago, you have retaliated by wronging me, now. As for promising to welcome this newly-married couple here, as my children, I cannot promise you—at least not now. I must first see this young man again, and have a square look at him. That is all I want. I do not care to talk to him—just want a fair look at him and the girl. It will be moonlight at eleven. Bring them to the edge of the swamp, where the duel took place, and I will be there to view them. I will then return to the manor. To-morrow, after the funeral is over, you may send them—no, the young man—to me, and I will tell him whether he is welcome at the manor or not. If welcome at the manor, I shall the next day draw up a new will. If not welcome, he will never receive a farthing! The interview is at an end!"

"Very well!" the Witch assented. "They shall be at the edge of the swamp to-night!"

They both arose, and he showed her from the house by the way they had entered, and, like some gaunt shadow, she flitted away.

CHAPTER XIV.

CONFRONTED.

WITCH HAYDEN hastened from Magerald Manor in high spirits, back to her cabin home in the swamp.

Reaching the cabin she found Fred and Sally there, they having returned from their hiding.

They were apparently happy in each other's society, noticing which, the Witch's eyes sparkled with delight.

"Oh! they'll mate like turtle-doves," she decided. "My vengeance has been a bloodless one, but will be complete."

Later she told of her visit to the manor, in all particulars, and its result.

"So we have got to meet the major, eh?" Flip Fred said, thoughtfully.

"Yes. He wants to see if he can detect any of the old-stock Magerald characteristics in you."

"And if he does not discover any?"

"Then the chances are large that he will steel his heart against you, and refuse to recognize you."

"What then?"

"As I told him. We will leave the place; go to one more desirable, and settle down. I have more money than I am given credit for having, my children, and it shall go for your prosperity, benefit and enjoyment."

"You are very kind; but I never could content myself to live off of anybody. I've too long been used to depending on my own exertions!" Fred responded. "However, I'm in no wise sorry I've taken Sally for my helpmeet, for I like her very much, and I'm sure we shall get along famously. Do you think my father will welcome us kindly?"

"I don't know. I hope so. He is a very stern man, however, and but for the fact that I humbled his proud spirit to the dust, I should fear not. However, I can judge better to-night."

The evening passed so pleasantly that it was time to visit the edge of the swamp ere they were scarcely aware of it.

After a few hasty preparations they set out on their way.

It was just eleven o'clock by Fred's watch when he and Freckles stepped out of the swamp into the wood-road, the Witch remaining behind under cover.

Major Magerald had not yet arrived; but it was not long ere his commanding figure was seen coming down the moonlit way.

Haughty of carriage, and with firm step, he approached until he was within a few feet of where the boy and his girl-bride stood in waiting, in the silvery flood of moonlight, making a very pretty picture; for one held the hand of the other, and there was a look of expectancy upon their faces.

The major paused and gazed almost savagely at the picture before him, his eyes alternating between the two whose fate was in the balance.

His features did not relax in the least after the severe inspection.

"Young man," he said, at length, his tone cold and stern, "do you know who I am?"

"You are Major Magerald," Fred promptly replied.

"Quite correct. And I understand that it is claimed for you that you are my son."

"So I understand, sir."

"How long have you known this?"

"Not long, sir."

"Were you aware of the fact when you married that girl?"

"I was."

"And knowing it, dared to marry her against my wishes?"

"Not being personally acquainted with you, it is not reasonable to suppose that I should know your wishes, sir. Had I known them, however, and wanted the girl for my bride, it could have made no difference. I should have married her just the same."

"Ah! Is that so?"

"That is so!" Fred replied, decisively.

The major winced. Was this Magerald spirit? Ay! he knew only too well it was; but of a more sterling form than that of the past generations of Mageralds.

"I suppose you were given to understand when you married the girl that you'd stand solid as the future heir to my wealth!" he burst forth, passionately.

"I was given to understand, sir, that an effort would be made to reunite me to you, and to make a place for me in your affection. As for your fortune—bah! for it! I have a few hundred dollars saved up, and I am not going to starve while I can work—nor is she!"

And he put his arm around Sally and drew her closer to him.

"Gallantly and effectively spoken!" the major said with a perceptible sneer, although within his heart of hearts the words had aroused a keen sense of admiration. "How am I to know that the girl is your wife?"

"Sir!" and Fred's eyes flashed angrily.

"Dare you doubt my word?"

"Oh! your word may be all good enough, but, you know legal proof is always essential. I presume you have a marriage-certificate."

"Our certificate will be ready to-morrow, sir."

"Ah! Well, I suppose that will do. I don't know that I have anything more to say to-night on the subject. I must carefully deliberate, as it is a matter of no little importance to me. The funeral of my son takes place at two P. M., to-morrow. You may call on me then at four. If I have concluded to receive yourself and wife, I will then apprise you of the fact."

And without another word the haughty master of the manor turned and strode away with stately bearing.

Fred and Freckles watched him a few minutes with intense curiosity, and then turned and reentered the swamp, where they met the Witch.

"You did nobly!" she said, patting Fred on the shoulder. "You two will reign at Magerald Manor, yet!"

CHAPTER XV.

"WHOM GOD HATH JOINED TOGETHER, LET NO MAN PUT ASUNDER."

MAJOR MAGERALD lost no time in getting back to the manor.

He entered the park, hurried through it, and entered the house by the front way, encountering Gnome in the dimly-lit hall.

"Have the watchers come?" he asked, hoarsely.

"Yes, sah! But, fo de Lor's sake, marster, what's de matter? You look like a ghost!"

"I am a ghost!—a perambulating one," was the retort. "Go arouse Dawson and order him to saddle Sheffield and bring him around in five minutes."

He then hurried on up-stairs.

In less than ten minutes more he was in the saddle and galloping away toward Fairfax.

When he drew up in front of The Arms, Sheffield was panting and decked with flecks of foam.

The major dismounted and entered the hotel, which kept open all night.

Daniels was on duty at the desk himself.

"Ah! good-evening, major!" he said. "What brings you here so late?"

"Business!" was the response. "Have you got any good brandy?"

"That I have!" and the host set out a bottle and glasses.

"Join me," the major said, pouring out a brimming glass.

They drank, and then the major glanced at his watch.

It was after twelve o'clock.

"Who's on guard at Hayden's room?" he demanded.

"Constable Jones, sir."

"Any one else?"

"No, sir."

"All right. Give Jones what he wants to drink when he comes down."

Then the major hurried away up-stairs.

He found Hayden's room, and Jones sitting outside the door, wide awake and vigilant.

"Jones, give me the key, while you go down and get a drink," the major said. "You needn't hurry back until I come down. I want to have a talk with the prisoner."

Jones hesitated a minute, then handed over the keys and walked away. He feared the major, under whose patronage he really was, and dared not refuse him.

When he was sure Jones had gone down-stairs the major entered Hayden's room.

The prisoner was partly reclining on the bed, but was not asleep.

He nodded slightly in answer to the major's bow.

Then the major quietly locked the door, and seated himself upon the only chair the room contained.

"Hayden," he said, beginning the conversation at once, "this is rather a serious charge that's been placed to your credit."

"Oh! I don't know. It hasn't worried me much."

"Indeed! You must be wonderfully strong-nerved. I believe that killing a man in duel in this State means a long term of imprisonment."

"So I hear. But I've never killed a man yet!"

"Of course I cannot swear positively to that. But the evidence is overwhelmingly strong against you—so strong that there's not a doubt but what you will be convicted unless some special intervention is made."

"Some special intervention?"

"Exactly."

"I do not understand you."

"Well, you see I have a powerful influence in this county with the courts, and were I to enlist myself in your behalf, there is no reason to doubt but what I could clear you."

"Well, on the other hand, you could secure my conviction as easy as the turning over of your hand—I suppose that is what you are driving at."

"Not exactly, but your words are nevertheless true. I prefer to help you, if you choose to be helped."

"Well?"

"I'll not beat around the bush, but plainly

tell you on what terms I will secure your release. Are you aware that Fred Floyd, ostensibly a pack-peddler, is really my own son, stolen from me years ago?"

"I am. I know all the particulars."

"Ah! Well, I wish to receive this young man at my home, as a son and heir, but there is an obstacle in the way. This new son of mine has gone and disgraced the Magerald name by marrying, at your step-mother's instigation, the swamp midget, Sally Shakes. I want her kidnapped and removed so far away that she will never get back to Fairfax. Then, after getting my son a divorce, I can receive him at the manor. The matter must be attended to. I don't want the girl harmed, but removed to such a distance that it will be years, at least, before she will be able to get back."

"But, sir, what is all this to me."

"This much—I want you to do the job. Nay! do not shake your head—you must do it. You want your liberty—more, you want Mildred's hand in marriage. You shall have both, and besides that, I'll start you handsomely in business if you'll do the job!"

Hoyt Hayden, however, was not the man to jump at a bribe, no matter how munificent it might be.

He simply laughed as he eyed the aristocratic master of the manor.

"Major," he said, deliberately, "excuse my presumption, but you are what I must now regard as equally a fool and a knave—a fool, for an instant to suppose that I could be tempted, under any circumstances, to enter into such an unmanly, unnatural and villainous transaction—a knave, to think of putting asunder those whom God hath joined together. I, sir, am an honorable man, and you have done me both insult and injustice!"

The major sat for a moment speechless with rage and astonishment.

He finally arose.

"So! my fine fellow, you refuse to do as I have asked you to do, eh?" he demanded.

"Most assuredly I do, sir!"

"Then hark you! I'll see that you spend the next ten years in the State Prison!"

And he left the room, locking the door after him.

Hastening down-stairs, he gave the key to Jones, and immediately passed from the hotel, vaulted into the saddle, and rode toward the manor.

Later, when he sat in his private apartment, with his head bowed in his hands, those words which he had heard uttered that night still rung in his ears:

"Whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder!"—and mechanically he repeated them.

"Yes! and so it shall be!" he said, slowly. "I have been a fool and a knave, as young Hayden said. But no longer shall it be thus. Henceforth, Maximilian Magerald, and to the end of your days, you shall be a changed man, and Magerald Manor shall resound with happiness which has so long been excluded!"

And he prayed that it might be so.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PRECIOUS PAIR SHOW THEIR HANDS.

The next day had been set for poor Dick's funeral.

The funeral service was to be held at the manor at two o'clock, after which the remains were to be taken to Fairfax for interment.

At noon the manor was to be opened to such as wished to view the corpse, but could not attend the funeral.

Flip Fred was up early that morning at the Witch's cabin, and after breakfasting, expressed a desire to see the remains of the young man who had so long unknowingly usurped his place.

The Witch at once came to his aid.

In an old chest in the cabin she had a multitude of clever disguises, and with a deft hand she soon had him so perfectly disguised that there was no danger of his being recognized by any one who had seen him before.

So, after kissing Sally, he set out for the manor, without any settled idea of what he was going to do more than to get into the park, secrete himself in some shady nook, and wait till the throng of callers came—then join them, and thus get a view of the remains.

He gained entrance to the park at the rear, and was soon settled snugly down behind a leafy summer arbor, which was so covered with foliage of creeping vines that no one within the arbor could see him, although he could see through an occasional opening and view the interior.

He had not long become settled down in the

nook when he heard footsteps, and making a cautious reconnoissance, saw Boyd de Bynville approaching. His appearance was as elegant as ever and he did not look as if he had ever killed a man in his life. He entered the arbor without taking the trouble to look behind it and sat down; then he lit a cigar and puffed leisurely away at it.

It appeared to Fred that he was waiting, and such proved to be the case, for, after a few minutes there were light footsteps upon the graveled walk and Fred soon was made aware of the presence of Madame Magerald.

She threw her arms about De Bynville's neck and kissed him rapturously, as she entered the retreat and then became seated beside him.

"I got the note you shoved under the door, love," she said, "and slipped away without being seen. Is there no danger of our being overheard here?"

"Not the least. I reconnoitered as I came. This part of the grounds is seldom visited."

"Well, then, what is it, dearest? Has anything important happened?"

"Yes, something of the utmost importance. But, first, are you going to attend the funeral?"

"No!" and madame shrugged her shoulders with a little laugh. "I am too indisposed, you know; I shall have a little chill before the services commence, and will not be able to come down."

"Ah! yes, I see. I suppose I shall be in duty bound to be present at the services, and go to the grave. But our work can be done afterward."

"Our work? Explain, please."

"Easy enough. There's only one of two things. I've got to light out of this vicinity, lively."

"Ah! and for what reason?"

"It has come to me where I saw that peddler, who called me by name."

"Possible? Explain."

"You remember the night I 'lifted' the pocket-book of Breed, a cattle-man, in a summer garden of Baltimore a year ago? By a slight-of-hand movement, I slipped it to you who sat at a table in my rear. You slipped out. I was arrested and although nothing could be proven against me, I was pretty well known to the court, and I got a month, on suspicion. Well, this pack-peddler who calls himself Flip Fred, was present when I was arrested and again at my hearing. I remember his face perfectly!"

"Well?"

"Well, you know, 'Lize afterward betrayed to the authorities that I *did* steal the pocket-book. We slid out of Baltimore in time, however, to avoid arrest. If this peddler is not a detective, I fear he may notify the Monumental authorities, so that I'm in danger."

"This is too bad. Must you really go? If you do, my love, I go with you!"

"Of course, Madeline, and we won't go empty-handed. We will take as much of Magerald's money with us as we can secure, and that will be a big boodle."

"You are provoking; why don't you explain how?"

"Well, you see, last night I discovered a secret way of reaching the Magerald strong-room."

"What?"

"Just as I tell you. In the summer kitchen there is a section of board wall that slides aside and admits you to a small secret stair. You close the panel and ascend a spiral stairway, when you find yourself in a room in the rear of the safes. One of the safes has a back door. You open it, and the interior arrangement of the safe comes out with it, so that you can get into the safe. Here you find that, by touching a spring, you can push open the front door of the safe and get out into the strong-room!"

"Merciful heavens! how did this ever come about? Does Magerald know of it?"

"Most assuredly not. I account for the fact in this way: The major's grandfather is said to have been a singular old crank. He built the back wing, and had the safes put in. He used to hide himself away from his family for days, and they could not find him. It was undoubtedly he who originated the passage and false safe."

"Most likely. And you found all this out last night?"

"Yes, but I could do no more. I had no tools with me, and was forced to be content with the discovery."

"Do you think you can open the safes that have money in?"

"Well, I should smile! I never saw the safe yet that I couldn't open. I can generally catch the combination, but, in case I can't, I can fetch

the door with my tools. Besides that, *all* the safes contain money, I suppose; anyhow, the shelves of the false safe contain fifty thousand dollars in glorious greenbacks. Just think of that!"

Madame uttered a little cry of dègnt.

"Is there no danger, love?"

"None in the least. You are to listen at the door of the strong-room, and guard against a surprise, while I go for the safes. It won't take me long to do my work."

"Suppose we are discovered?"

"There is no such probability. Be brave, and in a few short hours we will be possessed of unlimited wealth, and *en route* for parts unknown."

"I will try to be brave, dearest."

"That's right; and now, you'd better get back to the house. If you do not get to your room undiscovered, you can say you were out for a little fresh air."

After exchanging a few more words they left the arbor, De Bynville in one direction, and the madame in another.

After they were gone Flip Fred took possession of the arbor himself.

"Well, here's a go!" he soliloquized, scratching his head, reflectively. "The major is nursing as gallus a pair of crooks as were ever outside State's Prison. I knew De Bynville was a shark when I saw him at the bridge, but don't know's I saw the madame before. So they're onto me, and are going to skip out before it's too late, are they? Well, now, I fancy not. I'm entirely too flip to allow such a proceeding. Now, let me see. What am I to do, and how am I going to do it? That's the present question."

He deliberated for several minutes.

"There isn't any present danger," he finally concluded. "Nothing will be done till De Bynville gets back from the funeral, and the crooks can't get away with the swag until to-night. So I reckon the best way is to let the major go to the funeral, and when he comes back he and I will give 'em fits."

So Fred waited.

Noon soon came, and a crowd of country people and villagers assembled to view the remains of poor Dick.

Fred had no difficulty in mingling among them and entering the manor.

He took a pitying glance at the corpse, lying there so handsome, even in death, and then passed out and returned to the arbor.

At half-past one the guests bidden to the funeral began to arrive in their equipages.

At two o'clock the services were held, and at half-past two the remains of poor Dick were carried from Magerald Manor, never to return there again.

Then the funeral *cortège* moved off and wound away down the road toward Fairfax.

Major Magerald, Mildred and De Bynville occupied the mourners' carriage; but the madame remained at home, "indisposed."

CHAPTER XVII.

NO "BLACK LETTER" DAY FOR HAYDEN.

In the mean time, another event was transpiring, of interest to our story.

In the morning of the day of Dick Magerald's funeral the county sheriff arrived from the neighboring county-seat to take charge of Hoyt Hayden.

On learning that Hayden had as yet received no examination, he recommended that a hearing be held at noon, in order that he might take the prisoner to M—, by the afternoon train.

On finding that he was to have a hearing, young Hayden brightened, and succeeded in bribing one of the guards to go and notify the Witch, the fellow having previously visited the Hayden cabin, being one of the party who went for the body of old Tom Shakes.

The widow was busied in putting her cabin to rights when the messenger arrived and delivered Hoyt's message.

She read it and said:

"All right. I will come at once."

And the man departed.

"They shall never take Hoyt to prison if I can help it!" the old woman decided. "Hoyt's an exemplary young man, and he's goin' to have no stain on his name if I know anything about it. I wonder where on earth Sally is?"

She went out of doors and called loud and shrill, but no Sally answered.

"Off fishin' for frogs, like enough," the crone muttered. "There's one thing the new Richard Magerald has got. He's got a wife who ain't ashamed to help turn in an honest penny."

As there was no likelihood that Sally could

be found for the looking, the old woman reëntered the cabin and wrote a note, leaving it where Sally would be apt to see it on her return; then, putting a revolver in her pocket, the Witch set out for Fairfax.

The hour set for the hearing had not yet come when she arrived in the village, and so she had extra time to look up and engage the best lawyer to represent Hoyt at the hearing.

At last it was noon and Hoyt Hayden was taken to the 'Squire's office, where only witnesses were permitted to enter.

Among those inside the office were the 'Squire, sheriff, from M—, Tom Jones and the men who helped him capture Hayden, and the Witch.

The coroner who held the inquest over Richard Magerald's body was absent and would testify at the court trial, the sheriff said.

'Squire Grover opened the hearing by reading the charge against the prisoner, which set forth that Hoyt Hayden had, with malice intent, engaged in a duel with Richard Magerald; that the duel was fought with swords, and that during the fight Magerald had been pierced through the heart by a sword held in Hayden's hands; furthermore that Constable Jones and his *posse* of men had arrived on the scene in time to find Hayden standing with the dripping sword in his hand, gazing down at his enemy, who was not yet cold in death.

"And now, prisoner at the bar, what have you to say to the charge? Are you guilty or not guilty?"

"So far as the criminal part of the charge is concerned, I am not guilty," Hoyt responded, promptly.

"You may be seated. Constable Thomas Jones!"

Jones arose, was sworn, and testified.

"Myself and *posse* were searching in the swamp for the escaped peddler, Fred Floyd," he said, "but meeting with no success, we left the swamp at a point where the Magerald, wood-road connects with it. Here we came upon the scene of the duel. I saw a man lying prostrate in the road. I saw another man standing near him, with a bloody sword in his grasp. This man was Hoyt Hayden. I comprehended the state of affairs, and gave the order to secure Hayden. We made a rush, and Hayden turned and tried to fight us off, but we succeeded in making his arrest!"

There was some cross-questioning by the counsel for the defense, but all to no use; Jones could not be tripped.

The other men who had accompanied Jones at the time of the arrest were next examined, one by one, and their testimony was substantially the same as that Jones had given.

This ended the evidence for the prosecution as far as the present was concerned.

Hoyt Hayden was then sworn.

"What I have to testify can be said in a few words, at most," he began. "Yesterday morning, before sunrise, I started from my home to come to Fairfax, where I was to do some copying for my counsel here, lawyer Lee. It was just sunrise when I reached the edge of the swamp. I expected to see mother, she having left the cabin in advance of me. But I saw nothing of her. When I emerged from the swamp I was startled to see a man lying prostrate in the road. I hurried forward and saw it was Dick Magerald. We had always been friends, and I felt horrified. I knelt beside him and saw that he had just breathed his last. There was no one in sight, but there were fresh footprints in the road leading toward Magerald Manor. I picked up the bloody sword with which Dick had been killed, and was examining it when Jones and his party pounced upon me. Realizing the suspicious situation I was in, I turned and tried to keep them off until I could explain. But they overpowered me. That is all, as God is my Judge!"

"Is there any witness for the defense?" the 'Squire demanded.

"There is," lawyer Lee said, pushing the Witch forward. "This woman saw the duel fought!"

The widow was accordingly sworn.

"I witnessed the duel!" she said. "I was near the edge of the swamp when I heard voices. Reconnoitering, I saw that two men were about to fight a duel. It wasn't any of my business to interfere, and so I kept quiet and looked on, from where I was secreted. The men fought, and Richard Magerald fell. The other man dropped his sword and hastened away toward Magerald Manor. He was scarcely out of sight when Hoyt Hayden came out of the swamp, and discovered the body lying in the road. I was about to join him when Tom Jones and his men rushed

from the swamp and made the arrest. I concluded to keep mum until the proper time came for me to speak."

"Did you recognize the man who slew Magerald?"

"I did. He is a guest of Madame Magerald at the manor, and is called Boyd de Bynville!"

"Is that all?" the Squire asked; "for, if so, I will remand the prisoner to court, for trial. Your testimony is insufficient to warrant me in liberating him, and—"

Just then there was an imperative knock on the door. The sheriff opened it, and Freckles breathlessly pushed her way into the room.

"Say!" she broke forth, as she stood flushed and excited, and swinging her sunbonnet in her hand, "can I have a say in here?"

"If you know anything about the case step up and be sworn!" the Squire said, with a frown.

He had been in office six months and had never yet been able to send a case to court.

"Do I have to swear?" Freckles asked.

"Of course—you have to make oath that you will tell the truth, and nothing but the truth."

She took the usual oath; then the Squire looked at her sharply.

"Well, what have you got to say?"

"This. I see'd the duel fought, and Hoyt Hayden didn't have nothing to do with it. Boyd de Bynville killed Dick."

"How did you come to see the duel?"

"I was out early, baitin' for frogs, an' when I got to the edge of the swamp I see'd Flip Fred up in a tree!"

"Flip Fred!"

"Yes. I didn't know what he was up to, so I watched awhile. Finally, I was goin' to come out o' the bushes, and bone him, when I see'd De Bynville comin'. Then, Dick he come, fetchin' two swords. Then they fit, and Dick got killed, and De Bynville turned tail an' cut fer the manor, purty fast, you bet!"

"Then this Flip Fred must have witnessed the duel."

"He did."

"Where is he now?"

"Up at the manor, mebbe."

"And is De Bynville there, too?"

"Spect likely he is. That ain't all!"

"Well, what else?"

"Well, you see, I was up near the manor gates, a while ago, seein' what was goin' on, when I found this a-layin' in the grass, close to the gates. I looked at it, an' went hum. Then I cum here. That's the proof of the puddin'."

She handed the Squire a soiled envelope, addressed to Major Magerald, which had never been sealed. Inside was a sheet of paper containing writing.

"This is Richard Magerald's writing," the Squire said. "I know it as well as my own."

"Read the letter," the sheriff said.

"Very well. Here are the contents:

"MAGERALD MANOR, Aug. —.

"DEAR FATHER:—
When you get this I may be dead, but if so, know that I died in defense of my sister's honor. Mildred came to me and informed me that the black-hearted scoundrel, De Bynville, had insulted her. It made my blood boil, for I have detested the fellow ever since he came. So I challenged him to meet me; and we fight, ere you get this, with swords, at the end of the wood-road. If I am killed, don't mourn, for Mageralds have fallen before me. You are too old to avenge me—but just show this letter to Hoyt Hayden. He'd lose his neck for Milly and me. Farewell.
DICK MAGERALD."

When he had finished reading the letter, the Squire turned to Tom Jones.

"Constable, release the prisoner!"

While to Hayden he added:

"My dear sir, you are to be congratulated."

And so Hoyt was released, and he took Freckles in his strong arms and kissed her with brotherly affection.

"Squire, issue a warrant for this De Bynville!" the sheriff said, after shaking hands with Hoyt. "I'm bound to have company back to M—, and I don't know but what I'd prefer De Bynville to our friend Hayden!"

The warrant was accordingly issued.

When Hoyt Hayden left the Squire's office, and it became known that he had been cleared of the charge against him, he was received with tremendous cheers, and fairly raised and carried on the hands of the people.

It was thus far from a "black-letter" day for him!

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION.

WHEN the Magerald carriage returned from the cemetery it still contained the major, Mildred and De Bynville.

Flip Fred, who in concealment had been

watching for its return, had been anxious lest the latter should not come back.

It was long after three o'clock when the carriage reentered the manor grounds, but Flip Fred did not venture to approach the manor until it was four.

Then removing his disguise, he mounted the front steps and rung the bell.

Mildred answered the summons, and bowed, with a sweet smile.

"Are you the young gentleman papa is expecting?" she asked.

"I am," Fred replied, politely.

"Then step inside, sir."

Fred obeyed, and was conducted to a rear parlor, where the major was seated in an easy-chair.

He arose, however, when Fred entered, and extended his hand.

"Ah! you have come, have you? I have been waiting for your appearance. I suppose you are anxious to know your fate?"

"Not yet, sir!" Fred replied. "There is something of more importance on the hooks to attend to first."

"Something of more importance? Well, well! let's hear what it is. But, stop—I am forgetful of late. Richard, this is my adopted daughter, Mildred—your step-sister. Mildred, this is my son, Richard Magerald."

Mildred advanced and took Fred's hand.

Her face betrayed her amazement better than words could do.

"You see," the major said, "he whom we laid away in his final resting-place to-day was not my own son, although I have always believed him so to be until recently."

He then went on and gave a brief but comprehensive statement, which Mildred accepted readily, and welcomed her new brother heartily.

"And now, sir," the major said at length, turning to Fred, "what is this matter of importance to which you referred?"

"One, I fear, that will pain you to hear."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, sir. Are you aware that your guest, De Bynville, is a notorious 'crook' and jail-bird?"

"I have had my doubts about him."

"Well, he is as I tell you. He is wanted in Baltimore for picking pockets."

"Ah!"

"Exactly. It was he who fought the duel with my predecessor as your son, and killed him."

"By heaven! is this true?" and the major leaped to his feet, white with passion.

"It is true. But, sit down, and be calm. You have not heard half yet. I saw the duel fought. I was in hiding in the tree near which the duel was fought."

"Why did you not tell me this before?"

"For fear it might scare the game away before it could be bagged. To go on: I suppose your wife is pretty thick with De Bynville, whose Baltimore name is Frank Fielding?"

"I am not blind to that fact."

"Well, she and De Bynville propose to bid a long farewell to these parts to-night."

"Let them go. I shall not endeavor to stop them!"

"Oh! yes you will."

"Why?"

"Because they also propose to carry away with them as much of the Magerald money as they can bear."

"What! rob me?"

"Yes; but listen without interruption and I will explain."

And he did; nearly word for word he repeated the conversation that had passed between the "crooked" pair during the interview in the arbor.

Major Magerald listened in silence, as did Milly; but both were deeply affected.

"So they are at work now?" the major said, hoarsely.

"Very likely."

"And, but for you, would get away with a great part of our fortune. Dick, my boy, although I last night made up my mind to welcome you and your child-wife to the manor, I now thrice welcome you. But tell me what shall be done? You have a younger and a longer head than mine. I'll leave it all to you!"

"Well, in the first place, you'd better call in your confidential servant and let him know the state of affairs, and have him stand guard at the summer-kitchen entrance to the secret stairway!"

"It shall be so. But first tell me: was it by this false safe and secret passage that you got out of the strong room?"

"Yes. The Witch Hayden has evidently known of these secrets for years. It was she who let me out."

"Then, no matter what her other faults," the major said, thoughtfully. "She is at least honest. At times there has been as high as a quarter-million of dollars in that safe which she could have taken as well as not. But never a penny has turned up missing."

Gnomewas called in and made acquainted with what was going on but did not evince much surprise.

"I's bin 'spectin' dey was up to some debbilty," he said.

He was stationed in the summer kitchen armed with a pair of revolvers and a stableman was sent for Constable Jones.

He soon returned, accompanied by Jones, the sheriff, Hoyt Hayden and a couple of other men.

When explanations were made the sheriff, well-armed, ascended the front stairs of the house, accompanied by Gnome and the door of the sitting-room was suddenly thrown open.

At the same time Flip Fred and Constable Jones gained entrance through the open safe.

De Bynville had opened one safe and he and the madame were sorting over the money.

The surprise was so complete that they could make no attempt at resistance ere they were pounced upon and handcuffed.

What shall we say in conclusion?

Richard Magerald—no longer Flip Fred—forgot his peddling profession, and with Sally, his bonny child-wife, took up his home at the manor—and thus the widow's vengeance was consummated.

With the coming or our young friends the grim old Virginian home underwent the change the major had prophesied. Happiness drove out the unhappiness; music, mirth and general hospitalities brightened everything, and light hearts and happy youth caused the old grim haunting shadows to steal away, never to return.

Even the major seemed to grow younger every day of his life; smiles drove away the severity that for years had held possession of his stern face, and with his children a happier man did not exist in all the Virginias.

The proud old Magerald spirit had been humbled, and that, too, to a most happy purpose.

De Bynville was tried for his various offenses, and was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment. But when that term expires there are many other indictments against him, and it is doubtful if he lives long enough to walk outside of prison walls a free man.

The madame got a year as accomplice, but did not outlive the sentence; the exposure and conviction killed her, thus saving the major the necessity of a divorce.

Hoyt Hayden became a favorite with the people after his release, and thrived, prospered and, under the major's patronage, became an eminent citizen.

When he was worth enough to support a wife in a comfortable way, he wedded Mildred, and two truer hearts were never united.

The murderers of old Tom Shakes were never found. They evidently "shook" the Black Swamp after committing the crime, and no trace could be discovered of them.

Gnome still lives, a faithful old servitor.

Tom Jones eventually became sheriff, and made a good record.

The widow Hayden forsook the swamp, built her a cosey home, and lives in retirement, although she and the major are on friendly terms.

No one ever thinks of mentioning her as the Witch any more, and she is universally respected.

A handsome monument was erected at the head of poor Dick's grave, and the major visits it often, and flowers never cease to bloom there, except in winter.

As for Black Swamp, its frog-fishing industry lost an earnest advocate when Freckles left, but plenty of marketable frogs are there yet, and plenty of swamp squatters to catch them.

What can we say about Richard and Sally in conclusion?

Little more than that their marriage has turned out to be a most auspicious one, and they are happy as happy can be.

They have a little child, too, to cement their affections, and Freckles—but stop! she no longer is freckled—firmly declares that he shall be named not only Fred, but—

FLIP FRED!

THE END.

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